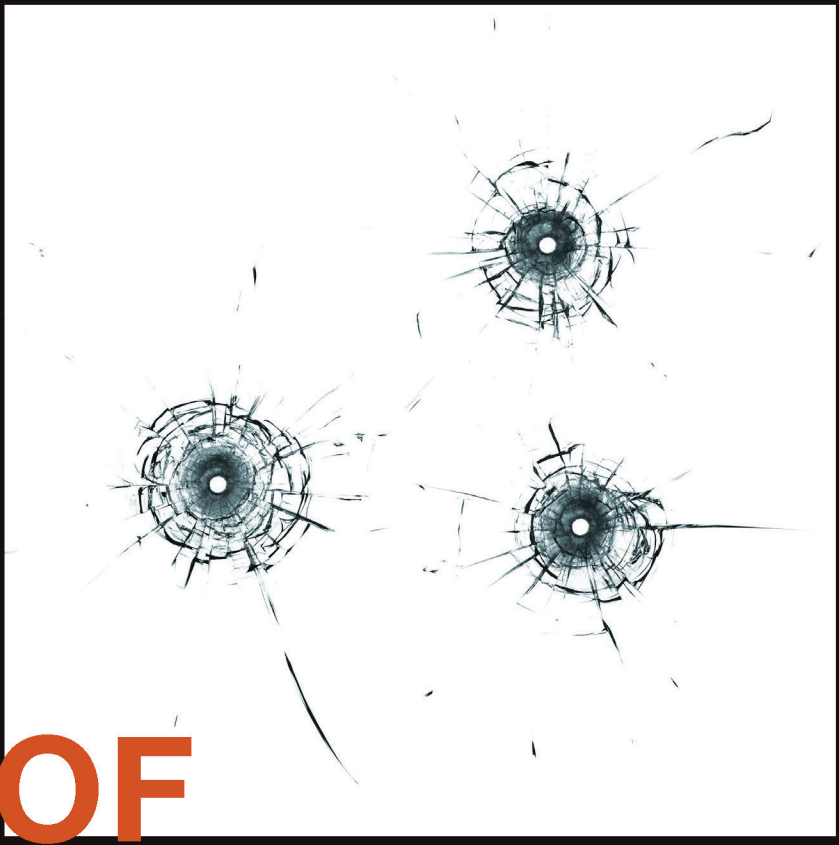
A SENSE OF BRUTALITY



PHILOSOPHY AFTER NARCO-CULTURE

CARLOS ALBERTO SÁNCHEZ

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Introduction

PHILOSOPHY *AFTER* NARCO-CULTURE

The task of future philosophy is to clarify men's ideas as to the social and moral strifes of their own day.

—John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*

Philosophy exists wherever thought brings men to an awareness of their existence.

—Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy and the World*

"'It's a Crisis of Civilization in Mexico,' with over 250,000 dead, 37,000 Missing." In an echo of Latin American's "Dirty Wars," gang violence has fueled mounting disappearances, leaving mothers to search for their children's corpses.

—*Washington Post*, November 14, 2018

This book deals with a phenomenon that may seem to fall outside the purview of philosophy, considered in its traditional sense as the human preoccupation with the eternal and the universal. The phenomenon in question is the unmitigated savagery related to narcotics trafficking—or, to put it in terms we will use here, the phenomenon that preoccupies us is narco-violence, or the violence of "narco-culture."

Offered here are a series of philosophical reflections *after* narco-culture. By this, I mean that the philosophical reflections are motivated by the violence and death that characterize this form of life. With over one-quarter of a million narco-related deaths in Mexico alone since 2006, when the administration of then president Felipe Calderón declared "war

against narcotrafficking,"[1] narco-culture represents a historical event, a "crisis of civilization," that demands a philosophical intervention. Similar to French philosophers who philosophized *after* Auschwitz, Mexican philosophers who philosophized *after* Tlatelolco, and American philosophers who philosophized *after* 9/11, these reflections assume that the occasion of 250,000 deaths well into the twenty-first century forces us to interrogate our most basic assumptions regarding human sociality.[2] In this tradition, what follows are meditations, reflections, or interrogations on various aspects of the *historical event* and *the social fact* of narco-culture that, although starting from the concreteness of that culture, force us to reconsider some of our most basic and entrenched philosophical concepts: culture, violence, brutality, and personhood.

As a historical event and a social fact, narco-culture and the violence that frames it reveal a human crisis—specifically, an "American" crisis. Its Americanness is given in its history. Particularly, the history of narco-culture is wrapped up with the history of America's War on Drugs, which in the twentieth century lent a very unique profile to American social, cultural, and political identity. At the roots of narco-culture, for instance, we find the Harrison Narcotics Tax Act of 1914, which regulated the sale and distribution of opiates and coca products and continues to do so to this day; narco-culture's contemporary influence we can likewise link to American (or US) intervention in the dismantling of the Colombian drug-trafficking infrastructure—namely, with the fall of Pablo Escobar in 1993. We can say that narco-culture is the dialectical residue of these policies and these events. More impactful to its continual survival and evolution is its reactionary relationship with US antidrug (and border) policy, a relationship that forces narco-culture to continuously change, morph, and evolve with every new regulation US lawmakers invent to curb or combat the sale, consumption, and trafficking of illegal or illicit drugs. As drug use and sales are further criminalized in the US, thereby pushing consumers and producers alike further and further past the periphery of legality, Mexican narco-culture flourishes and

1. Borbolla, "Estrategia fallida." Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
2. For instance, on philosophy after Auschwitz, we can count Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*; and Lyotard, *Differend*. After Tlatelolco, see Revueltas, *México 68*; and Monsiváis, *Días de guardar*. After 9/11, see Butler, *Precarious Life*; and Chomsky, *9-11*.

becomes mainstream, turning "Mexico at the dawn of the twenty-first century into a bloodbath that has shocked the world."[3]

If John Dewey is right and the task of philosophy today (Dewey's "future philosophy" is, in my mind, "today's philosophy") is to "clarify" our ideas as to the "social and moral strifes of our day," then thinking about the violence of narco-culture certainly qualifies as a topic that philosophers should worry about—especially "American" philosophers. After all, every month thousands are indiscriminately murdered on our continent as a result of the specific operations of the particular cultural complex that operates in our own day, and this, I contend, certainly counts as "social and moral strife." I am motivated by Dewey in suggesting that a "crisis" of this nature should matter to philosophy. Some will object that Dewey's proclamation was simply a result of his pragmatist commitments and that he meant something else by that statement. It could be that by "social and moral strifes" he meant social and moral disagreements in general—conceptual confusions that lead to social and moral issues (in general)—and not strife so specific that its actors could be pointed out and named. Perhaps, but this demand for a more radical and situated engagement with the world around us is emblematic of what we could call the *radical branch* of philosophy. Thus we find the call for such engagement in the eleventh thesis of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, where he tells us that "the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways [when] the point is to change it."[4] We find it in José Ortega y Gasset, who, after proposing the principle that "I am myself and my circumstance," or that my circumstances are intimately tied to my identity—that I am my circumstances and my circumstances are me—he immediately demands engagement, saying, "If I don't save my circumstance, I don't save myself."[5]

In this tradition, I will endeavor to think about narco-culture and, so as to save myself, about violence and death. Methodologically, I will work on the fringes of phenomenological existentialism, and thus I consider this study to be, first and foremost, phenomenological and existential. As

3. Grillo, *El Narco*, p. 3.
4. Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, pp. 569–71.
5. Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote*, p. 45.

such, my analyses will be directed to the given in the circumstance, to the phenomena, and from there extract meaning and essence. Karl Jaspers attests to the application of phenomenological philosophy to the types of urgent moral conflicts such as the one we are presently considering. One key passage tells us,

> What task can a philosophizing human being set himself under this violent terrorism? . . . The fundamentally new fact is that today large numbers of men simply vanish and are never heard of again. The individual's impotence is complete. . . . For the wholly forsaken individual may cease to trust himself, may begin to doubt evident truth if he alone sees it and can no longer discuss it. The individual seems to be capable of taking utter absurdity for truth if an overpowering environment forces it upon him by its lasting influence. . . . [But], philosophy . . . should strengthen the powers of resistance to the cynical propaganda of a public life that has become monotonous, to the lure of yielding to the faith in absurdity which reaches so dreadful a climax in the confessions at show trials.[6]

The "violent terrorism" to which Jasper refers to here is the terrorism of his own times—for example, the terror of war, the terror of fascism, of Nazism, and so on. The sentiment, however, could be equally applied to the violent terrorism of narco-culture, where "men simply vanish and are never heard of again," thrown into mass graves or dissolved in acid (as we will see below). Within the violent terrorism of narco-culture, moreover, the "individual's impotence" is, in fact, absolute; individuals are swallowed up by the culture of violence itself, defined in their identity by a cultural ethos, by an ideology that is greater than themselves—so much so that they can no longer think beyond the immediacy of their station and believe themselves impotently tied to their circumstance. The role of philosophy appears in these conditions of terror, impotence, and absurdity as a breakthrough, as the ability or the possibility to break through the frameworks and propaganda and see the violence in its uniqueness as

6. Jaspers, *Philosophy and World*, p. 6.

a situational crisis that should be articulated so that it may be understood (i.e., with Ortega, we aim to "save the circumstances").

The present introduction is divided into three sections. The first has sought to introduce the *philosophical* approach. The second section will aim to clarify the problem at hand while also preempting the objection that by calling narco-culture a brutal culture, I am convicting a set of people of barbarism. In the last section, I consider a dangerous misconception of the Mexican philosophy of death that suggests a symptomatic complacency toward the gratuitous murder and brutality of the systematically irrepressible violent demands of narco-culture—that is, I suggest that a Mexican *philosophy* of death can be thought to justify complacency toward killing, murder, and brutality. Between the second and third sections, I offer something of an interlude on a specific place that, considered abstractly, synthesizes the cultural nuances of narco-culture—namely, its rituals of death, its economy of excess, and the centrality of violence. The place is the narco-necropolis located on the outskirts of Culiacán in the Mexican state of Sinaloa: Jardines de Humaya.

IMAGES OF UNSPEAKABLE VIOLENCE AND BARBARISM

The Spectacle of Death

Familiar scenes are broadcast on television or computer screens: dead bodies strewn across dirt roads, riddled with bullets to the head, chest, stomach, face; headless corpses left inside abandoned cars, heads atop the car's roof, in the trunk, or missing from the picture altogether; the noticeable profile of human bodies wrapped with black trash bags or blankets leaning lazily against walls or fences. In many cases, written confessions accompany these crimes, detailing the reasons for the executions, decapitations, or dismemberments and the person or groups responsible. These written confessions are known as *narco-mantas* (narco-banners), the writers are narcos, and they are commonplace in Mexican narco-culture. For curious Americans (those on the US side of the border) perusing the pages of Mexican newspapers or clicking web links dedicated to Mexico, the War on Drugs, or violence on CNN.com, Fox.com, or any other news outlet, the scenes are troubling reminders that this kind of gruesome

and otherwise unthinkable and unspeakable violence remains a possibility outside conditions of war or the global politics of terror.

Although these scenes unfold in places and contexts that are usually unfamiliar to us, we are all witnesses. We have our technological advancements in news and social media to thank for that. Indeed, as a result of the media saturation that is indicative of our technological age, the horrible scenes and atrocities of narco-culture unfold as sidenotes on more relevant social and political happenings of our day; as mere sidenotes, however, they grab our attention, and we, the "innocent bystanders," are drawn in, unable to look away. We become witnesses. As witnesses, the violence that we encounter itself demands our response—we are asked by the things themselves to respond somehow—specifically, to respond in understanding.

How do we respond in understanding to this kind of violence? After all, this is a violence of an everyday type that is much more horrific, cruel, and brutal than what anyone *should* be *used* to. In what follows, we will try to understand this violence philosophically, or better yet, phenomenologically (i.e., as it gives itself). To begin, consider the following headlines detailing everyday cartel or narco-violence. What these headlines and their corresponding events demonstrate is a violence that is both excessive and dehumanizing, one that *seems*, prima facie, to be beyond understanding:

1. "5 Decapitated, Hearts Left in Mouths of Severed Heads" (April 26, 2018). In this gruesome scene in the tourist mecca of Cancún, Quintana Roo, authorities found five headless corpses inside a car, their heads mounted on the car's hood and roof. The mouths of the heads were sewn shut with steel wire. When opened, it was discovered that they were stuffed with the dead men's hearts.[7]
2. "Chilling Scene of the Narco War as Two Dismembered Bodies Found in Mexico City" (June 18, 2018). Two dismembered bodies were found in plain sight of Mexico City morning traffic. According to authorities, the "reason" for the grisly murders had to do with a "settling of accounts" between cartels. What was unusual about this crime was not *that* it happened but *where*: Mexico City,

7. "Decapitan a 5."

which up to recent times had thought itself immune to cartel violence. This is no longer the case. The first sentence of the news report is telling: "In a scene which is a bit unusual in Mexico City, but not in the rest of the country, two bodies, cut into pieces and dispersed across the street, were found on Sunday morning."[8]

3. "The DEA Warns of a Circle of Hell in Mexico" (July 10, 2017). The bullet-ridden bodies of the Martinez children were found curled up next to the bodies of their parents in a small rented apartment. The *reason* for their untimely death seems to be that the father of the children was thought to be involved with a group of assassins who killed a rival cartel member. No proof of complicity or connection was established.[9]
4. "It Turned Out to Be a Grave" (August 8, 2018). Seven decomposed bodies were found in a *narco-fosa* (narco-grave) located in the backyard of a neighborhood home. All the victims had been shot in the head and buried together—men and women. Previously, in the same neighborhood, twenty-eight bodies had been exhumed from a different narco-grave. The identities of the victims remain unknown.[10]

There is a common denominator to these headlines and the stories they tell, one that when properly fleshed out can help us make sense of what are otherwise unintelligible acts of extreme barbarism. As phenomenological observers, we may ask, If we think of these and all possible stories that one could tell about narco-violence, what is it that remains unchanged about them all—their invariant kernel of truth? In a preliminary way, we can say that the invariant is the obvious fact that the violence manifested in these acts is always *more* than the violence required to bring about human death; the violence in these cases is excessive and, we also say, "unspeakable." Words fail when a description is attempted. This excessiveness appears prima facie as the invariant kernel of narco-violence; it is, we say preliminarily, its phenomenological core.

8. "Escalofriante escena de la guerra narco."
9. "La DEA advierte del círculo del infierno."
10. "Resulto ser fosa."

What kind of violence is always *more* than violence? To think that it is simply violence underdetermines the acts in question. Violence, when it is simply violence, can be said to be formative in the constitution of subjectivity so that war, trauma, and other types of death struggles help *make us who we are*. In such a view (which I do not endorse), violence is creative and redeeming while also being that which serves as the horizon for the creation and redemption of persons. I take this view, proposed most notably by Jean-Paul Sartre in his reflections on revolutionary class struggle, to be too much of a romanticizing of the *uses* of violence by the oppressed.[11] In the examples above, no one is redeemed, and no one is constituted (in fact, we can say *all* are deconstituted).

Perhaps these acts of excessive violence—a violence that is "too much" and "unimaginable" while not seeming to fit the concept in a straightforward way—are just another modality of the concept of violence and not *something more*. Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek suggests three ways to think about violence: symbolic, subjective, and objective violence.[12] Symbolic violence is the violence of ideology, of metanarratives that oppress and victimize groups of people (the dominating narratives that sustain patriarchy and whiteness are symbolically violent, for example); subjective violence is the violence attributed to subjects, to psychopaths and resentful men; and objective violence is the violence that is, Žižek says, "systematic," "inherent in the system,"[13] "uncanny,"[14] and "anonymous" yet "determining"[15] of what happens in our everyday lives. It is the violence of capitalism, of the 1 percent over the 99 percent, of white privilege and masculinity[16]—what Buffacchi calls "more deadly and destructive than direct violence."[17] These three ways of conceptualizing violence seem to capture most of those realities that we think about when we think about violence: the violence of ideas, the violence of subjects, and the violence of institutions and systems.

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11. Sartre, introduction to Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*.
12. Žižek, *On Violence*.
13. Žižek, p. 9.
14. Žižek, p. 12.
15. Žižek, p. 13.
16. Žižek, pp. 10–15.
17. Buffacchi, "Two Concepts of Violence," p. 198.

In a certain sense, violence in the narco-context can be said to be objective in Žižek's trichotomy. As the examples above show, this kind of violence is common; we will even say that it is "everyday" or "anonymous" and "normalized" or "inherent in the system." However, what narco-violence also shows is an excess that can only be described as "unspeakable" or "unimaginable"—that, in those descriptions, shows itself to fall outside a space of justification or utility, that does not fit in the system or find reference in any other concept found within the known conceptual space used to describe human sociality. Often, as we will see (chapter 3), silence is the (morally problematic) cost of this lack of fit. Perhaps this excessiveness is that "uncanniness" of objective violence that Žižek points out—that is, the uncanny ability of violent excess to sink into the social fabric and become "anonymous" or "muted."

Here we see that "something more" of the violence of narco-culture that in its excess stands outside the rational space of justification: it is seen as a fact of the world (we see five decapitated heads with their hearts in their mouths), but we are unable to find words that describe the fact of seeing it and, failing to account for the excessiveness of the act, allow it then to fade into the horizon of acceptable violence (the decapitations and dismemberments appear "normal" in the context of narco-illegality). This *something more* turns out to be the play of presence and absence, being and nonbeing that is more than subjective violence, more than symbolic violence, and more than objective violence; it thus overflows or cannot be fully captured by the concept of violence. I call this something more *brutality*, whose logic, I will show, denies itself as brutality in processes of dehumanization, objectification, and destruction of human life. The logic of brutality contributes to a perpetuation of itself (thus breeding more violence and death) when it says that the excess is not extraordinary but normal and acceptable in its own context—when it says that excessive violence against another person is not excessive because the other person is not a person but a body in a War on Drugs, a "narco," a "criminal," or, when dead, a statistic, a number, or simply "someone who should've known what they were getting into." This person is thus totalized (objectified) in such a way that he can be killed and defiled *because* it is *not* irrational to kill or defile *these types of people* in the narco-context.

Hannah Arendt writes, "Violence is neither beastly nor irrational,"[18] by which she means that violence will always stand within a horizon of intelligibility where it will make sense; its rationality will be instrumental, always having a (rational) end. This is the case with brutality, which, as expressing that which cannot be said and demanding that it not be named in its being, appeals to a space of rational justification where the most "beastly" acts will be swallowed up by the normality of the culture itself. With this in mind, the goal should thus be to unmask brutality's pretense to rationality and normality, to bring it to presence so as to name it, and to expose it and bring understanding to bear upon it. I am convinced that the cultural space of narco-culture is the only horizon of intelligibility where this may be accomplished.

Is a Culture of Brutality a Culture of Brutes?

It could be said that in making these claims, and even in undertaking this project, I am running the risk of characterizing persons who exist within the space of narco-culture, or in those sectors of the Mexican community where it is found, as savages or uncivilized brutes. It is thus imperative to upend this criticism and propose that the unmitigated brutality of narco-culture represents one aspect of civilized society—namely, the extreme limits of neoliberal capitalism and hyperconsumer culture (i.e., the culture of excess).

It is hard to disassociate brutality from cultural backwardness. Mexicans themselves have a hard time making this distinction. In the spring of 2017, a wave of cartel violence in the states of Veracruz and Guerrero left eighteen dead within a twenty-four-hour period, prompting the governor of Veracruz, Miguel Ángel Yunes, to make the following declaration:

> These are cowardly acts, filled with vileness, that give us some idea as to what we are facing. We are not facing human beings, we are facing beasts, cowards, villains, persons who are capable of murdering children with the aim of holding our people hostage.[19]

18. Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 63.
19. López, "Ola de violencia."

The danger of such a characterization is that it places the blame on the irrational elements of the culture—on the psychopaths, the sick—while simultaneously distracting from the circumstances that allow and require such acts to take place. The beastly, vile, and cowardly acts are part of a system of allowances connected with an economy and a politics of excess.

An editorial in a Mexican journal attempted to sort out the "philosophy of the narco-trafficker," and to their credit, the editors were able to reduce it into one *dicho*, or "saying," pinpointing what this philosophy was in essence: "The philosophy [of narco-culture] was synthesized by a low-level provincial assassin in an interview after his capture: 'It is better to live 5 years as a king, than 50 years as a fool.'" This philosophy, they continue, "palpitates in an entire culture," and at its core are two maxims: "fast money with little effort" and "an asphyxiating materialist consumerism."[20] While this "philosophy" is more akin to a mantra and appears somewhat irrational, it is the *most rational* attitude one can have in a world that promotes such things as "fast money with little effort," that values luxury and wealth, and that measures success in the registers of excess. However, this mantra is not only a reflection of the culture; it is also a result of it. *One has to live this way*; it is demanded by a system of allowances—namely, by culture itself.

So the violence announced in the headlines, the visceral brutality of the acts, and the culture that allows it—these are not irrational or barbaric but part of the rational system of capitalist consumption of which narco-trafficking, narco-war, and narco-violence are a part. Nonetheless, my claim that brutality is constitutive of narco-culture would suggest that narco-culture is the culture of brutes or savages; the claim would suggest that I am making a judgment about the primitiveness of an entire sector of the Mexican population—that is, that I am holding on to the colonial conception that sees non-Europeans as uncivilized. After all, brutality, since Aristotle, is the behavior of those who cannot control their impulses and live dangerous and short lives. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle himself warns us against the "brutish types" who are "rarely found" but who "surpass ordinary men in vice" (1145a30–32). Brutality, he writes, is

20. Quesada, "La filosofía del narcotraficante."

a "moral state to be avoided" (1145a16), and he associated it with brutality with irrational and animallike barbarians—in his own time represented by uncultured non-Greek "foreigners" who posed a threat to the Greek polis and who thus existed outside the space of "*Reason*" (1145a30). The strangers were barbarian brutes; the Greeks were civilized. Thus the risk of referring to a particular cultural form as brutal is that brutality drags around its opposite, and so it appears that when we call those in the brutal, or alien, cultural form *uncivilized*, we are simultaneously legitimizing ourselves, albeit falsely, as civilized by default. In the present case, our association of brutality with the everydayness of narco-culture might suggest that narcos or those associated with the narco form of life are themselves irrational and animallike brutes that must be denied at all costs (even if, as Aristotle insists, they are "rarely found") or that narco-culture, in being brutal or demanding brutality, is no culture at all but a primitive state of war of all against all—a natural state of savagery housing "brutish types." This conception is maintained by Thomas Aquinas, who tells us that brutality is applied to those who bear a likeness to "wild beasts."[21]

Ultimately, the perception that brutality belongs to wild beasts is, of course, a key moment in the history of the West, particularly when it is deployed as a justification for colonialism, slavery, and cultural genocide. So I do not deny the association that exists when making the claim that brutality is a constituent moment in narco-culture, but I deny the truth of that association. Those involved in the murder of children or the dismemberment of human bodies are not animals; they are subjects who reason and engage in complicated existential negotiations, who participate in the machinations of modern hypercapitalism fully aware that they may succeed or die trying, and who, in their doings and commitments, create and re-create culture and history itself. I strongly believe that brutality is a function of our global culture and the economic and political scaffolding supporting most contemporary neoliberal states, and the particular form it takes in Mexico is merely its most obvious manifestation. To paraphrase the French philosopher Michel Henry, *culture precedes barbarism*:

21. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, pp. 1839–40.

> Barbarism is not a beginning. It is always the second to a state of culture that necessarily precedes it, and it is only in relation to this prior culture that it can appear as an impoverishment and a degeneration. Barbarism . . . is a ruin, not a rudiment. Culture is thus always first.[22]

This suggests that narco-culture is culture and not a primitive state of nature, a "ruin," or a "rudiment." Hence the omnipresence of brutality demands that we ask how this condition exists as a possibility and a reality in a legitimate legal, social, and cultural context—namely, the Mexican state, a context that is otherwise perfectly aware of itself as being rational, modern, progressively civilized, and humanistic.

Ultimately, I am not saying that Mexicans are brutal; rather, I maintain that the cultural topography of narco-culture is brutal, that its geography is brutal, that its rites and rituals are brutal, and that the logic of brutality predominates its intersubjective negotiations, its economy, and its arts—that is, in general, that the *ontology* of narco-culture (the kinds and types of beings and events that define it) is an ontology of brutality.

INTERLUDE: JARDINES DE HUMAYA

A central theme of the present book is that those scenes of violence illustrated above are not isolated events that manifest the extremities and excesses of culture; they are not nonsensical eruptions of barbarism and brutality exhibiting the dialectical nature of cultural progress. This book claims that such extreme violence constitutes narco-culture and thus that extreme violence can be constitutive of culture itself.

The objection may be raised that narco-culture is *not* culture but a sub- or marginal culture. This objection, however, depends on an essentialist view of culture, one that thinks that there is only one kind of culture and that narco-culture is not it. My view is that no such homogenous or hegemonic culture exists. There are no subcultures; there are only different cultures. Even if we were to insist that, yes, there are *sub*cultures (think skateboarding culture, surf culture, punk culture, etc.), narco-culture is

22. Henry, *On Barbarism*, p. 6.

not one of them; it is culture, pure and simple. One interesting phenomenon that makes this clear is the burial rites associated with the most notorious figures in narco-lore.

On a recent trip to Culiacán, Sinaloa, Mexico, I was granted access to the famed Jardines de Humaya. By all accounts, Jardines de Humaya is a cemetery. Established in 1969, it is located within the Culiacán city limits, and according to its website, it is an option for anyone looking for a final resting place. There are maps and price charts, with the costs associated with maintenance and upkeep exceeding the costs of living for the average Mexican.[23] This, however, is not an ordinary cemetery. The costs associated with it and the tradition that it announces indicate that this is not a "final resting place" for just anyone. It is reserved for narcos living (and dying) the narco-life; it is a narco-necropolis. As with all things narco, it is a cemetery of excess and extremes; it is a necropolis, a true *city* of the dead, with roads, Wi-Fi and cable access, functional plumbing, satellites, playgrounds, security cameras, and of course, tombs. The dead rule this city, and the only living things within its limits are the few construction workers building the next tomb, the trees that line the main avenues, and (on this day) my guide and me.

Jardines is a revered and almost holy place to the people of Sinaloa. In order to secure my visit as a foreigner, my host had to get "special" permission, and not from any government designee. (I'm not sure who he called or what kind of permission we received, but after a ten-minute conversation, I was allowed to freely roam the grounds.) This is a place that preserves the memory of *cultural* heroes, so the utmost respect is demanded before one enters and while one is there. There is a complete absence of graffiti on the walls, there is no garbage on the ground, there are a few dead or wilted flowers here and there that are sure to be replaced at any moment, and there are no wandering tourists snapping selfies. One goes quietly and reverently as if not wanting to disturb the inhabitants. In the dead quiet of the place, there are unannounced expectations about how to behave and how to revere—expectations that are alive, loud, and authoritative. There is a heavy threat of violence that descends with the warm, humid air. *Disrespect* is simply not allowed.

23. See http://jardinesdelhumaya.com/planes/.

During my visit, I understood I was merely a guest whose presence was tolerated insofar as I obeyed the rules, attended to my steps, and did not disparage the holy ground.

Calling Jardines a cemetery, however, does not do it justice. This is not a mausoleum. This is not truly a necropolis. This is a *living community* whose avenues and *homes* are possessed by reason and intention. The place itself aims to be a living representation of the ideal narco-community. Consider its architecture: the style varies from house to house, depending, I suppose, on the preferences of the narco who, while he lived, ordered its construction. A house in the baroque style sits authoritatively next to a colorful two-story modernist-style building, while behind it, a post-modern three-story tower with see-through windowpanes reaches for the sky. I have seen these streets and these houses before in the more luxurious areas of San Francisco or the Hollywood Hills, but no one *lives* here. These homes—furnished with sofas, televisions, air conditioning, heating, plumbing, and even playgrounds—are the homes of the dead, who in death fulfill some implicit cultural purpose.

This *living community of the dead* is the home of some of the most notorious gangsters in recent Mexican history. Entombed in the same lavish tradition as Egyptian pharaohs and Mayan snake kings, the narcos built for themselves a final resting place to reflect the life they led and the death they only dreamed of. In the extravagance of their burial chambers, they sought to mimic the extravagance of their lives. These tombs are monuments to a life lived in luxury or its pursuit, ultimately symbolizing the final price paid for their sacrifices, their courage, their daring, and their success (however short-lived).

Walking through narrow paths that carve out this "suburb" of Culiacán, through homes conceived in moments of peace in an otherwise fast and violent life with the foreknowledge that only by dying would one take one's rightful place as master of the house, I am assured that while "not all" narcos end up here, in Jardines, this is certainly a place to which those for whom narco-culture provides a form of life may always aspire. Of course, Jardines is not the only place where these lavish tombs may be found; some are located in private cemeteries scattered throughout Mexico, but a common characteristic ties them all together: the dead were involved in narco-culture in one way or another. One wonders about the narcissism

necessary to envision one's final resting place as a luxury condominium; the alternative would be that *thinking* of this place as a possible final destination is just another requirement of the narco-life. I can only conclude that this funerary ritual is a *cultural* aspect of that life, one related to that culture's attitudes regarding life and death.

Jardines speaks to the allowances of culture. This cemetery did not force its way into a plot of land on the outskirts of Culiacán; it was methodologically planned, financed, and constructed—it was allowed. It is a symbolic gesture of the culture of *el narco* itself. It is a testament to a cultural consciousness that glorifies material accumulation and excess. Jardines does not glorify death as much as it glorifies a life lived for the sake of economic success. The tombs are thus reminders and permanent symbols of a violent culture; they justify the permanence of the culture and a defiance of its own death.

Jardines is a cultural landmark belonging not to "Mexican culture" but to narco-culture itself. This is my point: once we zero in on a particular culture's philosophies of death, we have authenticated its cultural status. It is not a sub- or fringe culture; it is a culture, period. This is because locating the role that death plays within any culture can be done by looking at the rites of death practiced by members of the culture. We know what the Egyptians, the Mayans, and the Vikings thought about death (their own deaths and death in general) by the way that they buried their dead, and from this, we gather insight into the kind of lives they lived. Similarly, we can gather the narco way of life from the death rites of its culture. This is not to say that all narcos are buried with such excess and opulence, but it does speak to an established cultural aspiration that, along with other cultural aspirations related to that way of life (e.g., imperatives of money, violence, and brutality), marks a complete cultural ethos. As one mourner in Jardines summarized it to an American journalist, "We have narco culture running through our veins."[24]

24. Garsd, "This Narco Cemetery."

INDIFFERENCE TO DEATH

The violence announced in the headlines, excessive and "unspeakable," is embedded in a system of significance that cannot be called irrational or barbaric. Justification for those acts that render one silent is found within a space of reasons; it is found in the realm of rationality, which is culture itself. Narco-culture is a rational culture, justified as culture in its rites of death, its music, its "social sanctions,"[25] its codes of silence and honor, and its call for brutality, all of which blend into a hypercapitalist economic social consciousness where excess, corruption, and an "asphyxiating consumerism" are *reasons* (or values) that justify either the killing of the other in all of its possible permutations or complacency before the other's death. Nonetheless, it is easy for us to attribute irrationality and barbarism to those contexts in which such violence exists. It is easier to accept a brutal act as senseless or irrational than to accept it as an intentional act of a civilized and rational person. Perhaps this has to do with our own unwillingness to imagine *ourselves*, rational and civilized as we are, capable of such acts—with our own refusal to imagine *ourselves* as extremely violent or capable of unspeakable acts. This, of course, is an irrational assumption; we have no reason to believe that we are not capable of such acts.

One way to explain the willingness of others to engage in what we may want to think of as barbaric acts of violence is to imagine that, perhaps due to socioeconomic circumstances, these others are indifferent to death. Believing that, in a particular context, death is accepted with indifference or that it plays a pronounced role in the cultural imaginary would help explain *why* those who exist in that context are quick to devalue their own lives and enthusiastically lend themselves and their bodies to the narco-life; after all, if ultimately *la vida no vale madre* (life is not worth a damn), as a popular Mexican saying goes, then it doesn't matter how it ends.

25. I borrow the concept of "social sanction" from John Stuart Mill, who, describing what he called "the despotism of custom" (*On Liberty*, p. 134), identified social sanctions as (external) prohibitions on one's liberty. In narco-culture, such prohibitions that stymy freedom are necessary for cultural survival—for example, sanctions against "snitching," fraternizing with the enemy, and so on or sanctions that require violence, revenge, or corruption. See Mill, *On Liberty*; see also Mill, *Utilitarianism*, especially, "Of the Ultimate Sanction of the Principle of Utility," pp. 27–34.

Mexican sociologist and philosopher Roger Bartra suggests that acceptance of the notion that one's life does not matter, that one ought to be indifferent to death, is promoted by the social and political elite as a means of maintaining power by convincing the disenfranchised that their deaths will cause no alarm because they themselves have no intrinsic value or are not fully human (civilized) and worthy of the state's protection. In a similar way, my claim that brutality is constitutive of narco-culture would seem to suggest that calling brutality a constitutive feature of that culture must mean that those living in it ought to be complacent about its happening or, worse, that they must resign themselves to their brutal fate and respond to brutal violence with more brutal violence, a suggestion that would play well into the colonialist conception of non-Europeans as barbarians (Aristotle) or wild beasts (Aquinas).

This is then a real danger with the thesis that *brutality* is a constitutive aspect of narco-culture: according to the history of the concept of brutality itself, to call a people brutal is to equate them with animals, with *brutes*, with the unhuman. Again, brutality is a phenomenon of civilized culture; we can say that it is simply a consequence of intersubjective (and thus human) coexistence, where empathy and fellow feeling are subsumed under a logic of violence that is internal to human togetherness that demands, for its own sake, ever-present processes of objectification and dehumanization. Brutality is, in this sense, a human phenomenon of civilized people in modern (late-capitalist) societies and not one restricted to the animal kingdom.

In this section, I would like to consider a philosophical conception of death that, if fully fleshed out, would give us reason to think that the excessive violence that underscores the logic of narco-culture is, in fact, a reflection of the value placed on death by Mexican culture itself. In particular, I consider the view of Mexican philosopher and poet Octavio Paz, who has previously argued that a certain "indifference" to death is inherent in Mexican culture more generally conceived. Paz's remarks about the Mexican attitude toward death will help frame our discussion about brutality and narco-culture. Of course, Paz's claims have not gone unchallenged, and for reasons similar to those I have mentioned above—namely, that an "indifference" to death belongs to barbarism and not civilization—I will consider the strongest case against Paz (Roger Bartra's) and suggest that

neither Paz's nor Bartra's accounts give us sufficient reasons to think that the rampant and escalating lethality that plagues modern Mexico can be justified by such philosophies of death.

In *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Octavio Paz's classic treatise on Mexican identity written in 1951, death plays a constitutive role in the formation of Mexican identity. "Tell me how you die," Paz declares, "and I will tell you who you are."[26] A variation of "Tell me who your friends are, and I will tell you who are," Paz's declaration aims to highlight a very Mexican attitude toward death—namely, that the ways of death and dying, like the people with whom one surrounds oneself, say more about who one is than any other aspect of his or her ordinary existence. For Paz, the replacement of *friends* with *death* is meant to point to an intimacy with death—with a pretheoretical sensitivity that says that who one is gets reflected in how one dies. For this reason, death is *the other* for Mexicans, the other who serves as a "mirror," who reflects me back to myself—or, as Paz puts it, "Death defines life."[27] In that mirroring with death, life finds its limit and its end. This, according to Paz, is the modern conception of death in Mexico, the one that defines modern Mexican life. In that conception, life and death are intertwined, and they are of equal value.

In *telling you how I die, I tell you who I am*. I am the way of my death. This means that my death will reflect my life or, simply, that I *should* die as I lived. If my death is tragic, then my life was tragic; if my death is quiet, then my life was quiet; if my death is violent, then so was my life. In a telling passage, Paz writes, "Death, like life, is not transferable. If we do not die as we lived, it is because the life we lived was not really ours: it did not belong to us, just as the bad death that kills us does not belong to us."[28] An incongruity between life and death whereby one's death does not reflect one's life can only mean, according to Paz, that somewhere along the line, one's life was (somehow) replaced with someone else's life. If I don't die as I lived, then I died someone else's death. This can only mean that I lived a *false* life, a life in bad faith, an imposed life, or a stolen life. If I die a tragic death while having lived a peaceful life, then the

26. Paz, *Labyrinth of Solitude*, p. 54.
27. Paz, p. 54.
28. Paz, p. 54.

peaceful life I lived was false; it didn't belong to me. Likewise, if I lived a violent life but die a peaceful death, then the violent life I lived did not belong to me; it was imposed, it was false. Who or what imposes a life that can only lead to a "bad death"—a "wrong" death, one that did not belong to me in the first place? If this is the "modern" conception of death, then we can only guess that modernity itself makes possible these incongruities.

Modernity interrupts the simplicity of dying. Unlike the pre-Hispanic Mexicans, for whom death was a natural continuation of life and thus not an end or even a mirror, modern Mexicans see in their own deaths the story of their lives. So a good death points to a good life and vice versa. This means that a good death (or better yet, a *right* death, one that belongs to me) is, of course, desired *at all costs*. Because it is desired at all costs, all attempts at dying a good death that reflects a good life will fall short. So the good death has to be invented; the invented death will account for a life (supposedly) lived to its fullest—a fullness reflected and introduced into the world as a fact among facts, as Jardines de Humaya illustrates in its architectural opulence. Paz writes that the modern Mexican "is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love."[29] This is not literally the case, of course. The idea here is that death is ever present in the Mexican everyday consciousness, and while we are afraid of dying, of the inevitableness of death, it is not the kind of fear from which to run and hide behind blind consumerism, false security, or any of the many games we play that distract us from thoughts about our own personal demise. Paz calls this an "indifference to death," by which he means that Mexicans do not give death any more importance than that which they give any other aspect of their own lives.[30] It is the indifference of she who is not surprised by the arrival of the unwanted guest—the indifference of someone who, while afraid of an arrival, expects what is coming nonetheless. Paz writes,

> The Mexican's indifference toward death is fostered by his indifference toward life. He views not only death but also life as nontranscendent. Our songs, proverbs, fiestas and popular beliefs show very clearly that the

29. Paz, p. 57.
30. Paz, p. 58.

> reason death cannot frighten us is that "life has cured us of fear." It is natural, even desirable, to die, and the sooner the better. We kill because life—our own or another's—is of no value. Life and death are inseparable, and when the former lacks meaning, the latter becomes equally meaningless. Mexican death is the mirror of Mexican life. And the Mexican shuts himself away and ignores both of them.[31]

Paz's observations of the Mexican attitude toward death lend a difference to Mexicans that some, like Roger Bartra, repudiate as another colonialist ploy to demean the Mexican people, to regard them as uncivilized and uncultured. However, Paz is pointing out a phenomenon that is seen, verbalized, and actually experienced in *modern* Mexican life. In literature, popular music, and art, we see Mexicans judging a lost life based on the manner of its death. A violent death is immediately reflective of a violent life; for example, when someone living in proximity to the narco-context dies a violent death, people tend to say, "He must've been doing bad things or hanging out with bad people." We see them reflecting on a life lived in poverty, in lawlessness, with little to no expectation of a government intervention that will better the circumstances and confident that history can only repeat itself in a Nietzschean eternal recurrence of the same. In these circumstances, men and women will naturally affirm that a "quick death" is preferable to continuing with a miserable life. In this sense, Paz says that life "cures" one of the fear of death, since one cannot possibly imagine that death is a *worse* option. The value of life is then equal to the value of death in the sense that neither has value. The passage above, however, also suggests that the inverse would be true. If on reflecting on one's life, one found it to be rich and full, lived in peace and serenity, with the confidence that its labors were worth the effort and that what one did in this life contributed to the betterment of those lives still to come, then death would mean *something*—it would mean something positive if death was rest or transcendence, or it would mean something negative if death was the interruption of that life. In either case, one's death would reflect one's life—that it matters to die would have meant that life itself mattered. Looked at in this way, Jardines de Humaya is the cultural

31. Paz, p. 58.

representation of an effort to (perhaps retroactively) lend (or force) meaning to a life lived. The opulence of the tombs means to tell us (or to convince us) that the dead lived opulently, which in the language of narco-culture means that the particular life had value and was lived "well" (or in accordance with narco-culture's ideals of success and the "good life").

In Roger Bartra's *The Cage of Melancholy*, however, the case is made that this death narrative is a myth, reflecting relations of power meant to marginalize and degrade by convincing everyday Mexicans that their lives are worthless and can be easily squandered. The subtext of the death narrative, then, says that modern Mexicans have failed at the project of modernity due to their inability to participate in it and that they are *always already* failures living miserable lives and dying miserable deaths. This subtext thus justifies a tragic existence where violence and brutality are natural consequences—where misery is expected and accepted as a normal aspect of Mexican life. Ultimately, Bartra aims to explain the "indifference" that Paz says characterizes Mexican life:

> I have suggested that the Mexican's "indifference to death" is a myth having two origins: religious fatalism, which fosters lives of misery; and the disdain of the powerful for the lives of the workers. . . . In Mexican culture these two tendencies intertwine to weave a peculiar fabric that ties together despair and disdain, anxiety and pride. But there is a third element in this cultural fabric surrounding death. The felt longing for a paradise lost is transformed into an intellectual quest for the authentically human dimension buried by modern industrial civilization.[32]

Unlike Paz, for whom the "indifference to death" is a phenomenological fact—that is, it is given in his observations of Mexican life—for Bartra, this givenness has an origin, and an intentionally malicious one at that: the desire of the elites to maintain power over the rest. There is a process here: the church fosters lives of misery *so as* to keep the lower classes in perpetual need of religion while the powerful (through politics, education,

32. Bartra, *Cage of Melancholy*, p. 62.

and popular culture) foster "indifference" *so as* to rid the workers of their fear of death *so that* they may easily accept their own deaths and the exploitation that precedes them. "Such people die like animals," says the myth, "because they live like them."[33] Tying all of this together, according to Bartra, is the intellectual effort (e.g., the philosophical, poetical, artistic effort) to convince the exploited and the marginalized that this indifference to death is natural, or human. Thus, Bartra writes, "the myth of the Mexican indifference to death, the man who disdains death; this is one of the most trite commonplaces of modern Mexican thought."[34]

Bartra's explanation goes far in exposing the reasons for the Mexican attitude of fearlessness in the face of death. It is a product of modernity and related to relations of domination that have existed since the Conquest. Those who live recklessly and fearlessly can thus be said to suffer from a colonized mind that tells them that it is in their nature to live and die like animals. Bartra concludes that "the Mexican 'indifference to death' is [thus] an invention of modern culture."[35]

Alternatively, perhaps what Bartra means is that *not all Mexicans* operate under this paradigm of death indifference. However, Paz's point appears to be that *if and when* life itself lacks significance, then there is no reason for a person to think that death will be anything more than what it is—namely, the absolute cessation of the vital functions. The evidence is everywhere: songs, *dichos*, the chaos of the Mexican fiesta—phenomena that all point to if not a fearlessness toward death then at least a welcoming of it. Of course, if life is found to have meaning, then death will also have meaning; it will mean the end of a meaningful life or a transition to a more meaningful existence beyond this one.

When we consider the deadly violence of Mexican narco-culture, its normality seems to suggest an attitude of complacency toward death that is essential to culture itself, an attitude possibly attributable to a powerful yet implicit belief that death is just another necessary and inescapable fact of life. This is a belief that tells one to make what one can out of one's

33. Bartra, p. 61.
34. Bartra, p. 60.
35. Bartra, p. 64.

fleeting moment on earth. From the looks of things, the message is that *everyone* thinks this way, and so the death of the other, by my own hands or by another's, is naturally met with a certain degree of indifference. Moreover, since death is just another fact and, as Paz says, is reflective of one's life, then one must accept the *manner* of one's death, whatever that may be. *How* one dies becomes as meaningless as *that* one dies. Enter the radical violence that we call brutality. If death does not have any meaning outside the space of one's particular beliefs, and if it is just another fact among facts, then the manner of its arrival is not important; why not hasten it through the most extreme, excessive, and foul means?

We ask, Is this "indifference to death" natural to Mexicans because they are Mexicans, or is it socially constructed in the industrial machinery of those in power? There is no way to properly pry the socially constructed attitude from the one that is "natural" to the Mexican person. It is true that without the drug markets (both potential and those that already exist) and the underlying hypercapitalism that is required to make narcotrafficking the successful business that it is, the body count would not be as high and the violence required to protect it would not be required; there is also a sense that the political elite somehow allow the brutal massacres in an effort to maintain power by keeping the rural poor in a perpetual state of vigilance and fear. It is also true that this indifference and fearlessness toward death is historical, accumulating as a shared memory of ritual sacrifices (e.g., pre-Hispanic practices), cultural genocide (e.g., the Conquest and colonization), civil wars (e.g., the War of Independence), revolutions (e.g., the Mexican Revolution), and the more immediate and everyday experiences of machismo, paternalism, and hero worship, to name but a few. All of this means that attempts to locate this indifference to death through either a characterology (Paz) or political critique (Bartra) will naturally fall short.

The truth is that this indifference to death is a fact of the cultures of Mexico and not just an invention of philosophers or ideologues. It is a facet of the *ontology* of certain historically constituted peoples and not merely a psychological complex that has infected them all. Claudio Lomnitz's excellent study of Mexico's death culture, *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, clearly shows both the centrality of death for the Mexican people (in a general sense) and its multifaceted historical origins. Lomnitz writes,

> The most relevant questions concerning Mexico's elaborate history of death do not coalesce around the issue of whether it is an "invented tradition"—nor whether Mexican attitudes toward death are identical with those of any other modern society. These questions are superficial, and they do not even excite much academic interest. If death has been a looming presence in Mexican political discourse, it is because the political control over dying, the dead, and the representation of the dead and the afterlife has been key to the formation of the modern state, images of popular culture, and a properly national identity. These processes involve deliberate work on the part of intellectuals, popular classes, bureaucrats, and market vendors, true, *but the dead always exceed or fall short of their manipulative intentions*. There is no inventor, no owner, *no meaning that can contain death*, that can tame it.[36]

We are left with the *fact* of death as its own thing. The indifference to it cannot be reduced to psychological or political attitudes, as there is always a remainder. The remainder is what cannot be explained in our descriptions of the Mexican relation to death; it is that which ultimately grounds those behaviors that we, external and curious observers of Mexican life, find so appalling: the senseless murders, decapitations, dismemberments, disintegrations, and so on.

Those acts of unspeakable violence that, as unspeakable, should thus be passed over in silence nonetheless inform the constituting narratives of narco-culture; those acts can be justified in many different ways. Their justification can be grounded in the violence required by the competitive nature of unrestrained free-market capitalism, which creates the space for multinational drug trafficking to take root and blossom; they can be grounded in a politics of death that seeks to marginalize and oppress the poor and downtrodden by forcing them into the dangerous business of the drug trade; they can be grounded in a natural, essential, fearlessness-toward-death characteristic of Mexicans themselves that makes murder and being murdered a priori possibilities of a way of life. Whatever the justification might be, whether one or all of these together, violence is rooted in the cultures of Mexico, and in the case of

36. Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, p. 483 (my emphasis).

narco-culture in particular, it is a violence that, like death itself, cannot be tamed.

CONCLUSION

At one point during my "tour" of Jardines de Humaya, I ask my guide to point out the tombs of those he personally knew, and he motions to a few of the most ornate. "I knew that man there," he says, pointing to a brown, two-story, chapel-like structure with security cameras above gated bulletproof windows. "I asked him how many men he'd killed. He told me, 'Personally, maybe around five hundred, but I gave the order on another couple of thousand.' . . . They called him 'el Ondeado'; he loved to gut his victims with a long knife that he carried with him at all times [to] decapitate them, cut them to pieces. He was a brutal man." Indeed, the beauty of Jardines de Humaya conceals brutal deeds and the brutal men that carried them out. One spectacular tomb enshrines the body of a man cut to pieces by his enemies; another, of a man gun down by the Mexican Naval Infantry Corps; and yet another holds the body of a Mexican beauty queen savagely murdered by a jealous lover, a narco, who in his guilt built her the home of her dreams. The architectural perfection of the garden's buildings is meant to hide the ugliness of a life lived violently in the omnipresence of death.

Death is the horizon of violence; it is the end of horror, terror, cruelty, and brutality. Cultural conceptions of death thus help explain particular attitudes toward violence and its different guises. It is clear, moreover, that these conceptions do not cause violence; violence is its own thing, has its own essence apart from death. This book is an attempt to think about extreme situated violence as opposed to abstract conceptual violence; in particular, it deals with the kind of violence that provokes silence and detachment, a violence that demands objectification and dehumanization, a violence that in its ubiquitousness and everydayness has become ontological, a violence that in its excess overflows its own concept and thus requires a new name; we call it brutality.

The brutality that we think about is situated in narco-culture. The dead in narco-culture are innumerable, and the brutality that kills is said

to be unspeakable (although we will make an effort to *speak* it here), giving rise to what the *Washington Post* called "A Crisis of Civilization."[37]

OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

In the chapters that follow, I aim to show that the degree and the *kind* of violence we find as *common* and *everyday* in narco-culture reveal that there is some truth to every justification we may give it: men and women kill each other with unprecedented indifference and brutality not *only* because a colonial narrative has forced them into a murderous existence but *also* because in the *form of life* that is narco-culture, human bodies are commodities in the service of economic ends, and the life of the other, or the life of the narco-other, has no intrinsic value. Moreover, a history of fearlessness in the face of death, of indifference to death, has endorsed a narrative that accepts this brutality as its consequence. The end result is the acceptance of brutality as a way of life.

On the whole, this book is about violence. More specifically, it is a reflection on *extreme* violence and on the different ways in which extreme violence has been rationalized, politicized, and institutionalized in the spatial-temporal sociopolitical phenomenon that is narco-culture. Once narco-culture is delimited as a space of reflection, certain conceptual distinctions are made, which constitute the heart of the present interpretation. Specifically, distinctions are made throughout that are meant to disentangle violence, brutality, cruelty, and terror, concepts that are usually used interchangeably when discussing violence in general and violent cultures in particular, making a mess of clarity and ultimately confusing our philosophies of violence. My claim is that making these distinctions is a necessary step toward a clearer understanding of violence in cultural modalities such as narco-culture.

Central to the book is the claim that narco-culture is *brutal*, or that its violence is *more than violence*. This process, that of thinking *philosophically* about narco-culture and its brutal ontology, also forces us to interrogate (or reinterrogate) a number of previously well-established concepts in the

37. Cordoba and Montes, "'It's a Crisis of Civilization.'"

history of philosophy. Chapter 1 thus aims at a philosophical description of narco-culture that forces us to reconsider the notion of culture itself. Chapter 2 reviews the philosophical literature on violence, focusing on those conceptions that might better account for (or, in their failure to account, reveal the limits of the concept of) violence when confronted with the "unthinkable" violence that defines what I refer to interchangeably as the narco form of life, narco-context, or narco-culture. The concept of brutality as that which is *more than violence* better captures the reality of excessive violence, and this is the argument of chapter 3; it is brutality, I insist, that helps us account for the otherwise *unspeakable* ways in which persons are objectified and dehumanized into disposable objects in the machinery of narco-culture. In chapter 4, I reconsider the notion of personhood under conditions of brutality. I do this by thinking about a particular act, familiar in narco-culture: "making posol," or the act of killing, dismembering, and dissolving bodies in barrels of acid with the aim of bringing about their absolute erasure. The principal distinction among brutality, horror, and terror is made here, where I claim that brutality, unlike the others, does not obey the logic of the spectacle. Lastly, the concluding chapter seeks to tie these reflections together while hinting at possible ways to rethink violence in our contemporary context.

CHAPTER 1

On Culture and Narco-Culture

Death is close, but I don't know how to quit.
I know the government is looking for me, even under the sea.
But there's a trick for everything,
They haven't found my hiding place yet . . .

Money in abundance is a dangerous thing.
That's why I spend it, happily with my friends.
And women, I swear,
See money and lose their minds . . .

They say that my animals are killing the people.
But it's not required that you get in their way.
My animals are fierce,
If you don't know how to handle them, don't try.

—Los Tucanes de Tijuana, "Mis tres animales"

Our task in this book is to think *after* narco-culture. We endeavor to confront the phenomenon of narco-culture, taking it as our point of departure for thinking about violence, culture, and personhood. In order to do this, we must first understand what is meant by *narco-culture*—that is, we must see it for what it is or how it is given.

The *how* of its givenness is presented partially in the song above, sung by Los Tucanes de Tijuana, a popular musical group known for its narco-corridos. The "animals" in this song refer to the three kinds of illicit

drugs that fuel the economy of narco-culture: cocaine, marijuana, and heroin. The rest of the song introduces us to this *form of life*: In narco-culture, one lives in proximity to death ("Death is close"), which one must face courageously ("I don't know how to quit"), and one lives outside the space of law ("the government is looking for me"), motivated by material excess and the satisfaction of pleasure ("money in abundance . . . friends . . . women"). However, those who live this form of life also recognize that it is a distinct culture, a unique form that not everyone can survive, which is why "it is not required" that one play with the "fierce" animals if one does not have to.

We will see throughout the course of this book how these different elements play out. Regarding the last of these, for example, we will see (in chapter 3) that one does not have to "get in the way" of narco-culture in order to be constituted by it—one can still be captured by its cultural aura even if one is an "innocent bystander." Presently, however, our task is to get a better grasp on the nature of narco-culture. A popular Mexican magazine, *Excelsior*, describes it thus:

> Narco-culture . . . impregnates Mexican society, making its way not only into the arts but also into a form of life. To speak of narco-culture is to speak about the proliferation of products that articulate narcotrafficking in literature, music, and movie screens; it is to speak about the manner in which its roots are found intimately planted in [Mexican] society.[1]

This brief description, in fact, captures its essence *as* culture; narco-culture expresses itself in art, literature, music, movies, and so on, elements that fold into what, following Giorgio Agamben, I will call a "form of life"—namely, a manner of living *formed* by rules and customs, scaffolded by restrictions and social sanctions, and recognized by a particular ethos, which, in this case, is a *violent* or *brutal* ethos. This form of life that is narco-culture, one constituted in its founding by the practices of narco-trafficking and mythologized and glamorized by its rewards (and its severe punishments), has, according to *Excelsior*, "impregnated" Mexican society; it has fertilized it at its roots, and what comes next, what it births, is an

1. "Narcocultura y el reflejo en la sociedad."

unstoppable repetition and *reproduction*[2] of itself in spectacle, politics, and its persistently recognizable rituals of violence and brutality.

In the introduction, a claim was made that the violence of narco-culture challenges our thinking, or that it forces us to interrogate our most basic concepts. The aim of this chapter is to define what is meant by *narco-culture*, noting those characteristic nuances that define it as culture and not merely a sub- or marginal culture. I will refer to this culture interchangeably as a form, a way, or a manner of life—a life that is both excessively violent and rationally constituted. The proof of its *excessiveness* lies in the atrocities themselves, which for the past fifteen years have registered more than one-quarter of a million deaths; the proof also lies in the manner in which those deaths are accomplished—that is, in the brutality of its acts (I will treat this in chapters 3 and 4). The proof of its *rationality*, moreover, lies in its always instrumental economic calculus, a residue of modern neoliberal free-market capitalism.

WHAT IS NARCO-CULTURE?

In order to answer the question of *how* narco-culture challenges our thinking, we must first consider the nature of narco-culture itself. Technically, the term *narco-culture*, or *narcocultura*, refers to the cultural complex created by, surrounding, and produced by those involved in the business or practice of narcotics trafficking. So long as narcotics themselves are criminalized, their transport is likewise illegal, together with their production or cultivation, distribution, and sale. As a business, the transnational designs of narcotics trafficking make it extremely profitable; in the Americas alone, according to the United Nation's World Drug Report of 2017, Mexican cartels control business operations worth approximately $109 billion.[3] The people who oversee this illegal business, who participate in it or propagate it, are thus criminals or criminally complicit; these

2. Throughout, *repetition* and *reproduction* are used as synonyms and refer to the phenomenon of reproducing things, events, or ideas for mass consumption in capitalist industrial society. As Walter Benjamin writes, "The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence." Benjamin, "Work of Art," p. 221.

3. Lemahue, *World Drug Report 2017*, p. 23.

practitioners form an amalgamation commonly known as *el narco*. To *el narco* corresponds the business of narco-trafficking—but also a culture, one made up of "techniques, practices, and operations"[4] as well as "codes of conduct, styles of life, and relational forms of those who participate in the 'narco-world.'"[5] In other words, the political and cultural *techniques* for survival and expansion (e.g., corruption, bribery, intimidation), *practices* for the promotion of its rules and social sanctions (e.g., brutal decapitations, hangings, and other violent spectacles, as well as art, film, music, and practices of death and worship), and *operational* strategies for the success of its enterprise—that is, for the successful production and distribution of its goods (e.g., illicit drugs) and services (e.g., protection, kidnappings)—constitute what we could call the material and idealistic substratum of the culture of *el narco*.

Because this culture is essentially tied to a transnational business—one that ignores the claims of sovereignty so that any "rigid national borders appear non-existent,"[6] thus making it a "global problem"[7]—it would seem that narco-culture has no specific geographic center; it is everywhere. While this is true in the sense that its product is everywhere, it is rooted in particular geographic and national spaces: Mexico and Colombia.[8] The term *narcocultura* has pronounced weight in those countries, where compound nouns like *narco-religion*, *narco-corridos*, *narco-architecture*, *narco-graves*, *narco-economy*, and *narco-politics* inhabit common speech and saturate the social and political discourse. Thus while narco-culture has global designs and constitutes a global emergency (or a "crisis of civilization"), it is very much a local problem. Theorists agree: while one notes that "the cultural technologies of *el narco* have contaminated [Mexican] society at its roots,"[9] another adds that "the culture of violence inherent to the drug trade is a national phenomenon, from north to south, from the Atlantic to the Pacific."[10] It is plain to see that narco-culture "penetrates

4. Borsò, "Narcocultura," p. 1.
5. Ovalle, "Las fronteras de la 'narcocultura,'" p. 1.
6. Ovalle, p. 1.
7. Borsò, "Narcocultura," p. 2.
8. See Ovalle, "Las fronteras de la 'narcocultura.'" While Colombia is also a locus of narco-activity, our focus will be on Mexico for the remainder of this investigation.
9. Borsò, "Narcocultura," p. 4.
10. Moch, "Los papeles del narco."

all aspects of life in Mexico" through techniques, practices, and operations that, more than "contaminate" society at its roots, "present the drug trade as an attractive lifestyle choice and traffickers as heroes."[11]

The suggestion that narco-culture is a contaminant—that it gives rise to a crisis of civilization and is thus a form of life that perhaps should *not* be an "attractive lifestyle choice"—is grounded less on the fact of narco-culture's essential illegality. Rather, this claim relies more on the fact of it being an essentially violent culture—and more than violent, one could say a *hyperviolent* culture. Journalist David Pratt observes that "narcocultura [is] a value system glorifying brutal violence and adding a spiritual meaning to actions such as ritualized killings, beheadings, and torture."[12] It is hard to imagine how such a culture would be an "attractive lifestyle choice" to anyone, but as we will see, through the achievement of its values (brutal violence, loyalty, or economic success), narco-culture, or the narco form of life, becomes a real existential option, a social and cultural space to inhabit, where the dangers inherent in its definition are canceled out by the economic and *spiritual* possibilities it offers.

It is clear that narco-culture *glorifies* brutal violence, as Pratt notes, but it also demands it. For example, on any given morning, news of decapitations, mass shootouts, and massacres make up the content of *El Blog del Narco*.[13] The blog is an up-to-the-minute register of violent encounters, brutal acts, and all things narco-culture that publishes and republishes headlines and accounts that betray shock or surprise at a violence that has become all too familiar and definitive of Mexican daily life. A headline for August 26, 2017, reads, "Violent Day Leaves at Least 43 Dead in 9 Separate Events."[14] What is striking about the headline is that one would think that if more than ten or twenty people were murdered in one day, we would know *exactly* how many. The notion that this number is a rough estimate ("at least") is disturbing in its own right, but we are not told how many are thought to be missing from the estimate. The post does say that all of the murders are related to *el narco*, including that of an entire family by an armed commando; among the dead are children, a seven-year-old

11. Stone, "Narco-Culture."
12. Pratt, "Mexico's Drug Wars."
13. See http://www.elblogdelnarco.com.
14. "Jornada violenta."

and a thirteen-year-old, the latter assassinated with his father in front of their home. The post is faithfully informative and neither expresses moral outrage nor wonders as to who may be responsible. It tells us that police located guns and ammunition, but it says nothing of the perpetrators, as if there were really no perpetrators at all—as if *el narco* and narco-culture itself are the perpetrators in question and so nothing more needs to be said, since whoever reads it understands what it is that one should blame. The post ends there, and no other updates are available—there, or anywhere, or in the days to come—about either the dead or their killers. In thousands of other posts, pictures are included, showing the reader the reality of this "culture" and the bullet-ridden faces of the victims. Updates are rarely ever posted for these stories, since new horrors happen daily. This is the reality of this culture of violence, of narco-culture, and it exposes a limit to violence beyond which we can no longer speak of violence as such—only of terror, savagery, or brutality.

In spite of its characteristic violence—which is overt, well known, and publicized—narco-culture represents a *form of life*, one that provides a "mechanism of social inclusion for great sectors of the disenfranchised."[15] It is a culture that offers economic and existential opportunities for those otherwise marginalized by established social and political arrangements. As Mexican sociologist Lilian Ovalle puts it, the business of narco-culture offers a "real labor option."[16] One could say that it is the *only* real option for those who cannot enjoy or have been undermined by Mexico's neo-liberal experiments (e.g., NAFTA), for those for whom the other choice is between immigration and starvation, or for those who already exist on the margins of legality—namely, the poor and the uneducated. For these, narco-life is the only real option even though it brings with it a great "sense of uncertainty."[17] Ultimately, while gaining citizenship in

15. Ovalle, "Las fronteras de la 'narcocultura,'" p. 2. See also Muehlmann, *When I Wear*.
16. On being a real labor option, Lilian Paola Ovalle writes, "The social construction of narcotrafficking as an occupation appears then as a . . . constituted element . . . of the illegal project. It is important to note that the social recognition of narcotrafficking as a labor activity concretizes . . . the derision toward 'the narcos,' becoming a potentializing source for the persistence of the illegal project. However, this does not mean that narcotrafficking is accepted as a real labor option in every social sector." See Ovalle, "Construcción social del narcotráfico," p. 108.
17. Ovalle, "Las fronteras de la 'narcocultura,'" p. 2.

narco-culture requires only that one lives within or is born into its cultural space, participation in its *business* requires a rational decision (although a decision made among equally dire possibilities, such as starvation or immigration) to exist outside traditional and juridical boundaries—that is, a willingness to live with uncertainty, at peace with the consequences of lawlessness, and under the condition of perpetual (and expected) violence while under the constant threat of death. The lay philosophy that justifies this choice is codified in a popular adage: "It is better to live five years like a king than fifty like a fool" (Mas vale vivir cinco anos como rey que cincuenta como buey). In other words, although the *choice* to live the form of life offered by narco-culture seems irrational according to our (outsider) conceptions of rationality, it is, in fact, the most rational choice given the Mexican social and political circumstance, a circumstance in which the ideology of hypercapitalism, one that promises wealth and material excess *to all*, clashes with the reality of political corruption and material insecurity, making *being* a narco, or voluntarily participating in that form of life, an attractive option for those who would rather enjoy their moment as kings than live as fools an entire lifetime.

ON CULTURE

Considering what was said of narco-culture above—namely, that what it offers is a form of life that is destructive and not conducive to human flourishing in a traditional sense—is it right to call it culture? The question arises when we consider that culture, in a traditional sense, is thought to be that which perfects human beings or that which serves as the condition for the possibility for the pursuit of such perfection. We find this conception in the work of someone like Mathew Arnold, who writes, "Culture [is] the pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all matters which concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge."[18]

Narco-culture offers no such history of what we would today refer to as human "best practices." Nor does narco-culture pretend to perfect persons in any other way than through excess (e.g., "fast money with little effort").

18. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, p. 5.

This is because, as Aristotle has shown, excess is a vice and does not perfect (it does not lead to achieving our human "excellence"), since all activities that do not conform to a particular "mean"—that are deficient or excessive—will be vices rather than virtues. Excesses are, by definition, antithetical to the Aristotelean notion of "mean."[19] In this sense—namely, that culture encourages and perfects human excellence—narco-culture is not culture in the classical sense. Arnold lays out other "grounds" of culture that further disqualify narco-culture:

> There is a view in which all love of neighbor, the impulses toward action, help, and beneficence, the desire for stopping human error, clearing human confusion, and diminishing the sum of human misery, the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it . . . come in as a part of the grounds of culture, and the main and pre-eminent part. Culture is then properly described . . . as having its origin in the love of perfection; it is *a study of perfection*. It moves by force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion of pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good.[20]

The very business of narco-culture and its economic infrastructure, as it is grounded in capitalist principles of competition and conspicuous consumption, already preclude most of the communal behaviors Arnold sees as necessary for culture "properly described." Love of one's neighbor turns to distrust and suspicion, the desire to stop human error becomes the desire to conceal it (i.e., through corruption), and the diminishing of human misery changes into creating it for the sake of an economic advantage.

However, although narco-culture does not fit Arnold's definition of culture in the traditional sense, it is prima facie evident that the "culture" of *el narco* is culture in another sense. Insofar as it produces those things we can immediately recognize as cultural and thus as fundamental to culture—for instance, art, music, traditions, customs, rules for living and rites of dying, and so on—then it is culture. In a more specific way,

19. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, esp. books 2–4.
20. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, pp. 30–31.

we consider how that complex of techniques, practices, and operations (strategies) meant to facilitate the production, transportation, and sale of illegal narcotics lends, constitutes, and defines a *cultural identity*, a manner of confidently saying that a particular identity is tied to that form of life determined by the rules and sanctions of the narcotics trade.

We can skirt this worry about culture by thinking of narco-culture as a subculture, akin to punk culture, hippie culture, or even drug culture. But this approach gets us into fallacious territory, as it assumes that as a subculture, it is not really a culture but more like a *style* or a fashion, an approach to everyday existing that mimics culture as such while remaining always on the fringes of proper culture. However, this idea that narco-culture (or even punk culture or hippie culture) is a subculture or a marginal, underground mimicry of culture makes it seem as though there is one homogeneous culture to which we all belong—that there is one master culture against which all others are judged and all others mimic. In the case of narco-culture, thinking of it as a subculture assumes that there is a homogeneous Mexican culture that dictates what does and does not count as culture. This kind of absolutism is suspect for many reasons, none more pernicious than that it breeds the kind of rational essentialism that stifles thinking and marginalizes difference from the start. So in keeping with our phenomenological starting point, in which we keep to that which is given *in the way of its givenness*, we say that narco-culture is culture, since it gives itself as culture in that "other" nonclassical sense—namely, as a set of intersubjective relations where rules, demands, obligations, and allowances define a form of life. For narco-culture, the rules, demands, obligations, and allowances are not intended to perfect the human being but are rather related to the business of drug trafficking and the violence that characterizes it.

A more inclusive definition of culture, one that allows for narco-culture to be culture and not merely a sub- or marginal culture, is offered by Edward Burnett Tylor, who defines it as "that *complex whole* which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."[21] This conception is less rigidly normative than Arnold's and much less restrictive. We

21. Tylor, *Origins of Culture*, p. 1 (my emphasis).

can restate Tylor's definition to say that culture is that "complex whole" of values and beliefs "acquired" by persons through a process of being historically and intersubjectively situated in common. There is no demand for perfection here, only a common history of membership. Moreover, the "complex whole" is an imaginary space made real by the creation, production, and reproduction of knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, rules, customs, and so on and the interaction in and modification of these by social agents. Narco-culture is such a complex whole.

In this way, values themselves are materialized in culture as rules, guidelines, norms, preferences, and aspirations meant to structure and regulate sociality. These values—especially economic, aesthetic, intellectual, and religious ones—are codified into the social fabric and passed down from generation to generation as constitutive of *this specific culture*. This is an inheritance that must be reproduced for it to remain what it is, which means that culture itself is the perpetual reproduction of values. Our role as members of culture is thus to elaborate on and reproduce these values, to live them and live through them and beyond them as members of the culture in which they, and us, are found. As Mexican philosopher Antonio Caso puts it, "Culture is the continuing work of human societies. Culture . . . implies a synthesis of values, and values are constant relationships reflected in thought and action."[22] In general, we can say that any social arrangement whereby individuals work toward the creation, maintenance, and reproduction of inherited values is culture (whether this leads to human flourishing and perfection or not).

In aiming to give a proper description of narco-culture, social critic Jorge Moch has called it "a culture of the clandestine"—one that "takes advantage of a population struggling with poverty, lack of opportunities, and a class inequality."[23] He thus says that it is a "subterranean culture," a "subculture" for the "dispossessed."[24] He writes,

> Narco-trafficking has created a subculture, one that is feared and admired by the dispossessed masses. This subculture has been created by means of

22. Caso, "Human Person," p. 46.
23. Moch, "Los papeles del narco."
24. Moch.

> what could be called moral syncretism, namely, a morality that tolerates, in the end, the most extreme means of competition and territorial control while promoting certain unique forms of folklore, such as the worship of their own patron saints, the observance of their own codes of conduct unique to their own group or region; however, even in their diversity, they are unified by a common stereotype . . . above all *the fearless disposition to kill or be killed*.[25]

This description, however, illuminates a troubling yet foreseeable philosophical objection articulated previously: it assumes a homogenous, substantial culture of which narco-culture is "sub," or under which it stands. There is no such culture, neither in Mexico nor anywhere else. There is no *one* culture under which any other culture is but a derivative. We live amid a heterogeneity of cultures, and narco-culture is one among many. With this preliminary definition, we reaffirm that what is known as Mexican narco-culture is a culture in the proper sense.

My position is thus that narco-culture is culture. More specifically, it is a form of coexistence, an intersubjective arrangement with its own values, rules, and projects—that is, narco-culture is a form of life. Again, rather than being merely a subculture, narco-culture is a cultural modality that while intimately tied to the narco *form of life* is not limited to its participants, the dispossessed, or the poor; it stretches beyond its boundaries as a threat not to a homogenous culture but to political arrangements and conceptions of community against which it stands as a delegitimizing difference. What lends this cultural modality its difference is that as a *form of life*, it is constituted within a framework of rules and "exceptions" that authorizes violence, brutality, death, and *transgression* as its modus vivendi.

CULTURAL TENSIONS

A number of studies have drawn out a characteristic tension of narco-culture, one that asserts itself when we consider what it is that narco-culture contributes to humanity in a general sense. The tension is this: narco-culture gifts to humanity the spectacle of unprecedented death

25. Moch (my emphasis).

and unspeakable violence, on the one hand, and on the other, it lends humanity cultural artifacts of lasting significance. It is simultaneously a culture of both creation and destruction. As a creative culture, narco-culture contributes to music, fashion, film, music, and religion;[26] as a destructive culture, it gives us the practice of mass killings for the sake of economic objectives internal to its business—it gives us the atrocities that demand these philosophical considerations, it gifts us with the folklore that promotes a "fearless disposition to kill or be killed," as Moch indicates above, something that is a cultural contribution in the proper sense.

This tension appears most vividly in music with the narco-corridos, in literature with the narco-literature genre, and in religion. Consider religion: narco-religion (or those religious practices related to the form of life of the narco-trafficker) takes advantage of the devoutness of the Mexican people to which history can testify but adds the necessity for brutal violence. For instance, the leader of the vicious methamphetamine-trafficking cartel La Familia Michoacana, Nazario Moreno, wrote his own spiritual autobiography, considered a sort of bible directed to members of his cartel, where he offers a divine Christian justification for the brutality and death required to fulfill the cartel's objectives. The contradictory nature of this "bible" is readily apparent to anyone familiar with the nature of the Christian Bible (Moreno's is self-published under the title *Pensamientos* [Thoughts]); Moreno implores his followers to be forgiving, loving, humble, generous, honest, and "gentlemanly" while emphasizing the need for violence to bring about the fulfillment of their divine tasks (these tasks include protecting the people from "invaders," or cartels from other Mexican states, and succeeding in the methamphetamine trade). For such divine ends, enemies were flogged, beheaded, or crucified; one narco-manta left behind by Moreno's cartel laid beside a batch of decapitated heads read, "Let the people know, this is divine justice!"[27]

Narco-culture's saints and deities, such as Jesús Malverde (whose chapel or shrine is located in Culiacán, Sinaloa); Nazario Moreno himself, beatified in narco-culture after his "first" death;[28] and the Santa Muerte, or

26. See Wald, *Narcocorrido*; Muehlmann, *When I Wear*.
27. See Grillo, "Narco Who Died Twice."
28. Grillo.

"Holy Death," watch over assassins and violent clashes and adorn bodies (as tattoos) and weapons (as engravings), in every case serving as symbols of protection and blessing.[29] These symbols of divinity and holiness have become cultural artifacts of transcendent value—that is, their value and their meaning or significance now communicate the role of both violence and piety to participants in this form of life and, at the same time, legitimate narco-culture itself as a social phenomenon of real historical significance. Taking advantage of the Mexican people's history of devoutness, Maihold and Maihold add that narco-culture "feeds off of a morality motivated by cults and religion."[30] We can say that the iconography of narco-religion seeks to simultaneously legitimize itself in the eternal (the holy or religious) and in its antithesis, what stands against eternity and holiness—namely, violence and destruction.

A more philosophical way to articulate the tensions inherent to narco-culture is suggested by what Vittoria Borsò calls "the bipolarity of narco-culture":

> On the one hand, the production of texts and images that form part of what we understand under the concept "culture," on the other, the regimes of thanatological power for those for whom life is mere "material," bare life in Agamben's sense, material that can be destroyed with impunity.[31]

Narco-culture, as a compound concept, captures the bipolarity noted here: on one end, the term *narco* points to that extreme violence that destroys human life with impunity, to its "thanatological power" (power of death); on the other end, the term *culture* points to that intersubjective form of life where creation, production, and reproduction set the backdrop for coexistence and community, for security and social progress, for politics and justice. The synthesis of the two poles constitutes a phenomenon that demands our attention, since it is a phenomenon that challenges our concepts of culture, of politics, and of personhood itself.

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29. See Grillo, *El Narco*, pp. 186–88. See also Aguilar, "Una peligrosa admiración."
30. Maihold and Maihold, "Capos, reinas y santos," p. 65.
31. Borsò, "Narcocultura," p. 2.

And so we see that in spite of, or perhaps because of, its extremes and excesses, narco-culture spreads and "contaminates society at the roots"[32]—it becomes transcendent in our sense. We may ask, What about it makes it so easy to spread? What is its allure? Its allure is related to the manner in which it reproduces itself, as culture in general tends to do, in literature, music, film, and so on, which "produce narco-culture . . . [and] thereby increasing the spiral of violence and death."[33] We are reminded here of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno famously argue that culture is an industry that is "all-embracing" and reproductive.[34] Add to this that, as Moch points out, narco-culture has "its own language, even its own deities, such as the cult of Jesús Malverde [the patron saint of *el narco*] . . . [and] the cult of *la Santa Muerte* [Holy Death],"[35] and what Borsò calls its own "cultural technologies,"[36] and it becomes a "real" cultural option. These characteristics together make the influence of narco-culture hard to resist, as it avails itself as a possibility to those outside the existential horizon of *el narco*, thus becoming a form of life to narcos and nonnarcos alike, to Mexicans and non-Mexicans alike, as an *other* culture and *another* possibility of existence.

In short, narco-culture can be said to be a cultural formation that is contiguous with, congruent with, or identical to the techniques, practices, and operations of narco-traffickers in their everyday living, with the nuances of a transnational illegal economy that they manage in rational and violent ways and with cultural productions such as fashion, music, literature, film, and religion. Above all, or as its ground, narco-culture gives itself to our understanding as a culture of *expectation*—the expectation of violence, death, and a particular modality of violence that we call "excessive and unnecessary" and unconscious of itself: *brutality*.[37] As previously

32. Borsò, p. 4.
33. Borsò, p. 10.
34. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 100–107.
35. Moch, "Los papeles del narco."
36. Borsò, "Narcocultura," p. 4.
37. In the US, writers on "police brutality" define it as an "excessive and unnecessary use of force" by police officers. See Walters and Feist, "Police Brutality and Human Rights." In the American context, *brutality* is defined as "criminal violence," which means that the police officer is not allowed to exercise it because it crosses some predetermined

noted (see the introduction), the brutality of this culture is not the brutality of brutes, of the uncivilized beast incapable of political agreement.[38] It is the brutality of our contemporary world in its most competitive, antagonistic, and uncompromising form; the brutality modeled for and molded onto ideologies of excess; and finally, the brutality that mirrors cultural attitudes that hold death as currency while granting social power (as "regiments of thanatological power," as Borsò points out) to anyone willing to "handle" the animals.[39] It is thus the brutality of rational and civilized human beings at the start of the twenty-first century who wield or are submitted to thanatological power via cultural imperatives of violence and in accordance with an instrumental (economic) rationality that makes brutality itself ontologically determining—or simply a form of life.

CULTURE AND FORMS OF LIFE

Due to its essential illegality—which means that it exists without legitimate recourse to those otherwise political mechanisms necessary to resolve conflict, prohibit theft, and discourage corruption—narco-culture requires violence as its primary expression of power. As such, narco-culture, as a concept that captures an intersubjective arrangement and modus vivendi, is paradoxical, since it refers, on one hand, to an ordered and productive social arrangement and, on the other, to the illegal and violent processes that simultaneously destroy it. In spite of its contradictory appearance, however, and as *culture* in essence and performance, narco-culture is a

legal line. There is certainly something right about this definition, as we will see below. Brutality crosses lines, both legal and otherwise, which makes it easy to recognize. In places like the US, despite our liberal leanings, violence is accepted as a *means to particular ends*, but when we speak of "police brutality," this acceptance hits on the limits of what we can rationally accept.

38. As Leopoldo Zea tells us, brutes, or barbarians, were those who did not "fit" in the modern, civilized world—who existed on the margins of civilization. Clearly, participation in the world economy to the extent that narco-culture participates places it right at the center, not on the outside. See Zea, *Discurso desde la marginalizacion*, p. 28.

39. As George Monbiot puts it, "Neoliberalism sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations. It redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling, a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency. It maintains that 'the market' delivers benefits that could never be achieved by planning." See Monbiot, "Neoliberalism."

manner of existence—that is, it is *more* than the business of survival, control, and profit.

Above, it was suggested that narco-culture was a form of life, and I have been using *form of life* and *culture* interchangeably throughout. What do we mean when we say that we must understand narco-culture as a form of life? *Culture* and *form of life* are complementary terms. With the first, we mean a "category of the being of man,"[40] and with the second, we refer to the material that fills the category or, more specifically, to the "life" that lends content to the category—a life imposed by history itself through rules, traditions, language, art, and so on. It is important to insist on referring to narco-culture as a form of life for the simple reason that, as a form of life, narco-culture is more than an abstract category of culture but a real possibility of human existence.

Affirming that the narco form of life is a *possibility* of existence suggests that those who already exist within its existential and social spaces exist in it as a matter of choice. There is truth to this only to a certain extent, since some can be attracted by this form of life and decide to take part in it for the sake of bettering their material condition, for the sake of fulfilling a deep-seated desire for violence, or for mere show—that is, for the appearance of a violent lifestyle (for instance, American citizens who, from afar, take up the mantle of a certain cartel or appropriate aspects of the culture or form of life for the sake of personal grandstanding). But for those already in its social, cultural, and economic orbits (Mexican citizens in general and residents of certain narco-states such as Michoacán, Sinaloa, Durango, Chihuahua, Guerrero, and Sonora in particular), the choice to live *in* this form of life is a false choice; there is no choice. One can refuse to take up arms—remaining neutral and not participating in the violence—and one can refrain from cruelty and carrying out brutal acts, but even this refusal to participate does not uproot the person from the brutality of the circumstance. One is incorporated into and by the culture itself. While participating means that one is fully committed to the rules of the form of life, *not* participating just means that one has chosen not to kill or engage in the sale, production, or traffic of illicit drugs, but this

40. See Uranga, "Martin Heidegger." Uranga says that "culture is a category of the being of man and not of man's knowledge" (p. 356).

does not excuse one from the culture or the form of life, since one must still follow the rules and fulfill the demands of the culture; one must still live with the violence and the danger in silent submission.[41]

Another way to put this is to say that those who do not participate in narco-culture are nonetheless framed by it and thus must still reckon with its constituting forces—its violence and brutality. The reason is that narco-culture *as* culture extends itself outward via its violent imperatives, its rules, its music, its art, and its literature—as well as other forms of media spectacle and, most importantly, intersubjective relations—so that one can be a member of the narco form of life without having to have made a choice about it. The choice to do so is not a prerequisite for membership; we can say that one is *thrown* into narco-culture or that *it* is thrown into one.

A factor that contributes to the constituting force of narco-culture is that those existential and social spaces impregnated with this form of life are spaces that *already* offer few possibilities for other types of human flourishing. That is, marginalization (social, political, and economic) has contributed to making narco-culture and its corresponding business the only way *imaginable* (the only way that can be imagined) out of poverty, unemployment, and social and political exclusion.[42] Thus for those who live in spaces where the narco form of life is already operative, *if* there is a choice, the choice is between a short, violent, yet materially satisfied, life and a long, impoverished one—a choice that ultimately boils down to a very personal decision having to do with what one is willing to do or put up with in order to live a "better" life (even if it is shorter or more violent). More dramatically, this decision boils down to choosing between competing projects for one's undoing, commonly articulated in poetic fashion as one between *plata o plomo* (silver or lead, money or death).

Ironically, I take the notion of "form of life" from Giorgio Agamben's reflections on Franciscan monasticism, a form of life representing the opposite extreme of a culture of violence. Although Agamben's specific concerns are with the manner in which the cloistered life of the monk is

41. According to a recent study, 74 percent of Mexican citizens feel "unsafe" in their own cities, a fact that is directly related to the spread of narco-culture, its wars, and its business. In "Aumenta la percepción de inseguridad."
42. See Cabañas, "Narco-Culture."

lived so as to achieve a synthesis between "form" and "life," between the rules that govern being a servant of God and actually *being* a servant of God, I find that a similar synthesis is sought in narco-culture. That is, in thinking about the commitment required to *be* a narco, to live the narco lifestyle in spite of its illegality and its "perfect lethality,"[43] I find that a similar monastic synthesis is desired—one where success in the business of narco-culture means that a synthesis has been achieved between its rules (spoken or implied) and its activities (risking life and limb for the sake of the operation or committing acts of unspeakable brutality). Unlike the monastery, however, which is a choice for those who take up the oath, narco-culture demands this synthesis from those who willingly participate in its business and a less perfect synthesis from those who take no such oaths, but it demands a synthesis nonetheless (for instance, silence and obedience are demanded of those who participate in the culture and of those who do not, and to live in the culture means that one *is* silent and obedient). Nevertheless, Agamben's analysis can be extended to narco-culture—that is, to a form of life that is likewise defined by rules of living and acting that in turn perpetuate a living and an acting that create and modify its rules in the process.

According to Agamben, monks make a vow to a life in common with others, to a *koinos bios* (common life), one dedicated to the pursuit of an existence lived in accordance with spiritual principles and spiritually motivated acts.[44] This common life extends the boundaries of the monastery and is purposely lived *outside the realm of human law*.[45] The law that is followed is God's law (as given in the New Testament gospels), and the monks' lives are dedicated to achieving a "coincidence" with it.

43. Commonly associated with narco-violence is the idea of "perfect lethality," which refers to the certainty that in violent confrontations between narcos and the state or narcos and other narcos, all injuries will lead to death. A person who assumes the narco form of life willingly assumes this certainty—namely, that if and when there is a violent confrontation, the choice will be between killing or being killed. One stunning statistic presented by the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas showed that in 3,327 violent clashes between the police and narcos from 2007 to 2011, the state reported 1,223 deaths and 0 injuries. See the Index of Perfect Lethality in Mexico at https://elpais.com/internacional/2017/02/10/mexico/1486693490_817800.html.
44. Agamben, *Highest Poverty*.
45. Agamben, p. 1.

Following Agamben, we say that to live a life in common with others, one that is circumscribed by rules and a form that is *outside* the reach of law (the state), is a "form of life." Moreover, the goal of such a life is to achieve a "coincidence"[46] between *form* and *life*, whereby one becomes what one does and does what one is through adherence to the form—what Agamben calls a "forma vitae."[47] He writes, "Forma vitae designates . . . a way of life that, insofar as it strictly adheres to a form or model from which it cannot be separated, is thus constituted as an example."[48] Simply put, identity with a form of life requires only strict adherence to a set of rules or a "model" that, in turn, itself dictates the correct mode of living that form of life. For the cloistered Franciscan monks, this meant adhering to rules of poverty, chastity, and charity. Similarly, for uncloistered Americans seeking to live the "American way of life," for example, this might mean adhering to forms of constitutional law, patriotism, and rules of competition, consumerism, and positive freedoms. For willing narcos, this might mean adhering to the rules of obedience, loyalty, piety, violence, and excess that are inherent in narco-culture itself while achieving coincidence between the way one lives in the narco-world and the rules that define the goals of a narco way of life.

In this way, living the narco form of life is thus an activity—again, just being in the social space where this form of life is lived without living it (without seeking this coincidence) is not enough to nominate oneself as a narco (although one may exist in narco-culture). The narco must live according to the rules of the game and play the game so as to fulfill the rules. Cartels themselves as well as music, literature, and other media present the "model," the way that the life must be lived (its rules), and those who choose to live that life thus live it with the hopes of flourishing in that form of life—that is, with the hopes of achieving coincidence between *being* and *rule*.

For this reason, I insist that narco-culture as culture is a *form of life*, one that imposes itself on participants and nonparticipants alike. All who exist within its geographic and political framework are subject to its influence

46. Agamben, p. 99.
47. Agamben, p. 71.
48. Agamben, p. 95.

and the effects of its business. Narco-culture inhabits and is inhabited. While not everyone who inhabits the ontological space of narco-culture will seek to fulfill the rules of its way of life, the rules are nonetheless sanctioning and prohibitive and demand obedience through violence and brutality. Those who seek to fulfill the rules of its way of life, who inhabit narco-culture (and are not simply inhabited by it), are those who have made the choice given to them by Mexican society, by its politics and its economy, and who make a conscious commitment to it. This idea of "inhabiting" is significant, as it allows us to think of narco-culture as both a space of commonality shared by many (a habitus) and the commitment to participate in it (inhabiting):

> To inhabit together thus meant for the monks to share, not simply a place or a style of dress, but first of all a *habitus*. The monk is in this sense a man who lives in the mode of "inhabiting," according to a rule and a form of life.[49]

This inhabiting together, which for Agamben refers both to the fact that the monks will live together and to the fact that they will wear their own distinctive clothing (i.e., the monk's habit),[50] does not apply directly to our theme, as people in narco-culture live together only to the extent that they sometimes share a geographical space (Sinaloa, or Sonora, or Durango, etc.), but it does explain, to a certain extent, the distinctive fashion of narco-culture that can be attributed to a need to identify with the culture. In this and other ways, narco-culture, or the narco form of life, both inhabits and is inhabiting in Agamben's sense.

By no means is it being suggested that narco-culture is a kind or variation of *monkish* culture, one that can exist apart (cloistered) from other cultures and other modalities. This is not the case. The form of life that constitutes the habitus of *el narco* reflects the competitiveness, ruthlessness, aggression, and lust for money of late capitalist neoliberal postmodernity. That is, we find in the postmodern neoliberal landscape a culture (i.e., narco-culture) that seeks expansion, disregards borders,

49. Agamben, p. 16.
50. Agamben, p. 14.

disrespects individual life, and regards everything as a possible object of consumption, even human bodies and culture itself—which is the attitude of neoliberalism as described by thinkers such as David Harvey and Naomi Kline.[51] Unlike the culture of devotion that the monk inhabits and that inhabits the monk, the regulae of narco-culture promote antivalues like corruption, deceit, excess, violence, more violence, and death. In the end, narco-culture profits from its own unholiness and self-corruption, impurity and chaos, thus fitting nicely in the postmodern neoliberal scene. As Philip Sampson puts it regarding postmodern culture generally considered, "Once established, such a culture of consumption is quite indiscriminating and everything becomes a consumer item, including meaning, truth and knowledge."[52] Likewise, narco-culture sets itself apart as postmodern culture in its narco-regulae, which, as Maihold and Maihold point out, are ultimately "a postmodern matter: to live in the moment, to consume the maximum amounts as a means to participate in the society properly [and] to enjoy the present without pause."[53]

In fleshing out the notion that narco-culture is "postmodern matter" a bit more, we cannot ignore the economic motivations of narco-culture, which more concretely serve as the conditions for the possibility of a culture grounded in violence and brutality. That is, the narco-regulae that show themselves in the "postmodern matter" are tied to neoliberal economic optimism, rampant consumption, and unfettered enjoyment. In the narco-context, however, there are more serious consequences to the promised extravagance: brutality and death. Indeed, the entities of narco-culture—namely, drug cartels, which are the profit-driven enterprises that utilize all mechanisms made available by an open and free market in the postmodern age—rely on the very same economic rules that appear in the *legal* economy: aggressive competition, minimal government intervention, free trade, and the cultural glorification of conspicuous consumption. And like other economic operations, narco-business takes advantage of the fear and trepidation that it itself creates. Naomi Kline talks about "disaster capitalism," which describes the manner in

51. See the conclusion to this volume. See also Kline, *Shock Doctrine*.
52. Quoted in Lyon, *Postmodernity*, p. 61.
53. Maihold and Maihold, "Capos, reinas y santos," p. 65.

which a people in shock from natural or man-made disasters—or atrocities, in our case—can be forced to accept certain economic attitudes (neoliberalism, for instance) without objection as a form of "shock therapy" to get over their uneasiness.[54] In the same way, people in narco-culture have no option but to accept the regulae and the politics and the economics that emerge from the "disasters" and disorientations brought about by narco-brutality. However, because of their illegality, these same regulae that apply in the legal sphere are perverted and become excessive when applied to the narco form of life. Here, for instance, competition becomes brutality when narco-culture "instrumentalizes violence as the principal means of guaranteeing the fulfillment of its economic agreements";[55] similarly, conspicuous consumption in narco-culture becomes a social and existential requirement for excess and material opulence by any means necessary. Ultimately, all rules or values, whether they apply to monks in the cloistered way of life or to capitalists in the neoliberal economy, are inverted in narco-culture—an inversion that the culture itself demands and that can only be maintained by the most aggressive and excessive violence.

PHILOSOPHICAL CHALLENGES

The underlying claim of this book is that the reality of narco-culture challenges some of our most deeply held beliefs about culture, politics, violence, and personhood. Indeed, cultural critics have already pointed to a way in which narco-culture challenges us philosophically. As a complex phenomenon of late capitalism, it inherits problems to which only philosophy can attend. As Maihold and Maihold observe,

> The culture of *el narco* is . . . a fusion of temporalities, experiences and meanings: it is popular culture, because the supreme value is loyalty; it is counter-culture before modernity (religion and family over democracy and institutionality); it is post-culture (a pastiche where every symbol gives itself de-referenced from its original value of class, letter, or taste). It

54. Kline, *Shock Doctrine*.
55. Ovalle, "Las fronteras de la 'narcocultura,'" p. 2.

> is a product of capitalist modernity: capital, machineries and consumption, the fulfillment of the free-market dream: consume and you shall be free. But it is at the same time postmodernity . . . to live in the moment, maximal consumption as a way to participate in the social good, enjoy the present without hesitation: evil is in another part of the world called "the north."[56]

Here, Maihold and Maihold point to an almost absolute saturation of the contemporary social imaginary by narco-culture. Narco-culture is *everything*: modern and postmodern, individualistic (capitalist) and communal (family oriented), post- and counter-, consumerist and reckless, existentialist and popular. How, then, to approach it? What does the philosophical intervention look like?

It is clear that narco-culture demands a philosophical intervention. Jorge Moch writes, "Narco-trafficking is an unsolved riddle and signal of our social disintegration that in Mexico seems to have surpassed the limits of the global archetype."[57] There is obviously space within the ample social and political field of the narco form of life to tackle this "unsolved riddle" and ask moral, political, and even epistemological questions regarding *what it is* and *why* and *how it is*. While reflecting on the relations of responsibility between those within and without this cultural space, one can also ask about the nature and limits of the state and about the types of knowledges produced within a permanent condition of violence and brutality. However, due to the bipolarity indicated above (i.e., the tension represented by it being both creative and destructive, violent and cultural), narco-culture demands that we interrogate it and that we do so primarily as a form of life (i.e., ontologically) so as to *know what it is* and *name* that which lends it its characteristic difference—that is, its excessive, "unspeakable" violence, or brutality. For the purposes of the present intervention, this means that *my* philosophical interrogation seeks to be descriptive or phenomenological in orientation and focus; any deontological or normative prescriptions will be secondary.

56. Maihold and Maihold, "Capos, reinas y santos," p. 65.
57. Moch, "Los papeles del narco."

One might wonder why I insist on saying that narco-culture must be interrogated as a characteristically violent culture. I could, for example, focus on its contributions to literature (narco-literature), fashion (narco-fashion), or music (narco-corridos)[58] and on those bases offer interpretations that are transcendent in their own right, which can reveal new dimensions of human creativity and imagination. The reason for not doing this is straightforward: upon my first encounter with the social or cultural phenomenon of narco-culture, with this *form of life*, I was struck not by its literature or its art forms nor by its potential to contribute to a cosmopolitan vision of human sociality in the twenty-first century; rather, I was shocked by the excessiveness of its violence, by a form of life that demands *life* as a ritual offering. That is, what I encountered when narco-culture gave itself to my *philosophical* interest was the *real* destruction of the *concrete* other as a primary cultural objective, a modus operandi that runs through its center, its peripheries, and its outsides. From a philosophical standpoint, I recognized that the abstract nature of this culture is not what demands attention; instead, what demands attention is the concreteness of the culture, its *real* violence and brutality.

This is not to say that it is not possible to generalize about narco-culture. In fact, my purpose in this book is to make generalizations about its violence and brutality that transcend the limits of that culture. What must be remembered is that the core of this social and cultural phenomenon is a real violence and a real brutality that harms and dehumanizes real human lives.

The previous statement is, in itself, a generalization. Another, which informs the remainder of this work, is that we can understand the violence and brutality of narco-culture in a preliminary way that is similar to how Michel Foucault understands "power"—an understanding of power where it saturates the totality of a form of life, of a society or culture. We read in Foucault,

58. Of these other potential foci, narco-corridos have received the most academic interest (see chapter 2). But interest in narco-literature and in the analysis of the narco-fiction genre is increasing. See, for instance, Matousek, "Shades of the Borderland," pp. 118–42; and Michael, "Narco-violencia y literatura en México," pp. 44–75.

> The exercise of power . . . can pile up the dead and shelter itself behind whatever threats it can imagine. In itself the exercise of power is not violence; nor is it a consent which, implicitly, is renewable. It is a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions.[59]

Foucault is clear that by power, he does *not* mean violence. Power is everything, and it need not be violence. Power flows through all structures and actions and regulates them. It is always "acting upon" subjects and their being (it "inhabits," in Agamben's sense). In narco-culture, however, power and violence give themselves (in their phenomenal givenness, that is) at once interconnected. Violence or, better yet, brutality as that which better describes the excessive violence of narco-culture is the instrument of power; it itself constraints and forbids and acts upon the "total structure of actions." Brutality, as the threat, spectacle, manifestation, and unification of power in narco-culture, acts upon subjects and regulates culture "absolutely." To illustrate, decapitating an enemy/victim is a choice among many choices that present themselves as means to eliminating him. The enemy/victim could be shot, suffocated, stabbed, tortured to death, and so on, but the act chosen is the most excessive of them all—he is beheaded, his heart is ripped out of his chest and stuffed into his mouth, and his mouth is sewn shut with steel wire. The most excessive act is chosen because the demands for excess inherent to narco-culture—to its form of life, its economy, its being, and so on—also demand either that the killing/murder leave a lasting mark on cultural memory (so as to dissuade or prohibit disloyalty and challenges) or that it properly expresses (explicitly in spectacle or quietly in narco-culture's internal history) the power of those who proclaim themselves as powerful (again, to dissuade or prohibit but also to invite and promote). Moreover, immediately upon its performance, the choice to commit the most excessive of possible acts becomes a real choice, allowing for such acts to become part of the violent

59. Foucault, "Subject and Power," p. 789.

cultural registers of narco-culture from that moment on. Shooting the enemy/victim or poisoning him or suffocating him are still options, but the most narco-culture-appropriate option will now be the most excessive, or brutal, possible—for example, decapitations carried out with extreme brutality.[60] It is in this way, as Foucault says about power, that brutality "forbids absolutely"; at the very least, it forbids other acts from being the only means of erasing or destroying another human life.

In this book, we therefore avoid talk of power; we speak instead about violence or brutality. And we do so because violence and brutality are the only real constants in this cultural complex. Everything else that we can say about narco-culture—anything we can say about its fictional production, its music, its fashion, or its history—is contingent on its violence and brutality. If narco-culture ceases to be violent or brutal, then it is no longer narco-culture but something else entirely. Scholarly approaches to narco-culture will thus avoid the reality of this constant and look at the less frightening aspects of the culture. Thus Maihold and Maihold forgo capturing narco-culture in any one conceptual register and settle on looking at the various ways in which narco-culture reproduces itself: in music, particularly through the popular narco-corrido;[61] in media representations of machismo (which, ironically, demand the glamorization of the women of *el narco*—their role and their legend);[62] and finally, in religion through the creation and deification of saints whose sole purpose is to protect the violent from their *violent form of life*. Violence itself, however, is left unthematized.

To understand the totality of narco-culture, we must thus approach its violence and brutality to see how violence and brutality constitute its cultural aspect and how its violence and brutality constitute subjects in turn. Postcolonial theorist Quadri Ismail reminds us that "we don't have culture, it has us."[63] And nowhere is this sentiment more clearly validated than in narco-culture. As we put it above, narco-culture inhabits just as it

60. Ioan Grillo notes that "most of [narco-culture's] victims are not killed in battles—shootouts between armed groups, or clashes with the police or soldiers—but are dragged away by gunmen or are assassinated in hits." See Grillo, "Paradox of Mexico's Mass Graves."

61. Maihold and Maihold, "Capos, reinas y santos," pp. 68–90.

62. Maihold and Maihold, pp. 80–87.

63. Ismail, *Culture and Eurocentrism*, p. 11.

can be inhabited. For this reason, the best way to approach narco-culture is to see in what ways it has us—or, more appropriately, in what ways it has Mexican society. This "having," however, is simultaneously a constituting, a "making." Narco-culture *makes* its own possibilities and its own futures, but it does so through a making that *unmakes*—through the destruction of other possibilities and other futures (murder and dehumanization). To be inhabited by narco-culture is to belong to (to be had by) a form of life regulated by aggression and conflict; to exist in a social space where persons dwell as friends or enemies, heroes or contras; and to be *made* or, rather, *unmade* (through its social sanctions, rules, or regulae) into a subject for this inhabiting. In this way, narco-culture unmakes subjects; it strips them of subjectivity and personhood through its own regimes of thanatological power—regimes that have created a permanent condition of brutality in which everything, including murder and absolute and total dehumanization, is permitted and, worse, required. That is, the subject-nonsubject is interpellated as a person-object, dehumanized so as to be a use-object for the utilitarian ends of the narco form of life.

We also agree with Michel Henry's conception of culture as a function of life whereby forms of life (and its particular modes of living) replicate and reproduce themselves—as we have already pointed out, culture is a form of life. Or, as Henry puts it, culture is "an action that life exerts on itself and through which it transforms itself insofar as life is both transforming and transformed";[64] it is "the self-transformation of life, the movement by which it continually changes itself in order to arrive at higher forms of realization and completeness, in order to grow."[65] However, culture can also degrade life; it can be the possibility of its destruction. Henry calls this "destruction of the human being . . . the new barbarism."[66] For us, there is no homogenous culture previously progressing that is now in a state of decline. There are many states of decline in multiple registers and for a multitude of life-forms. For us, there are cultures where violence and brutality point to a real and not merely symbolic degradation of humanity itself. While we will not call it a "new

64. Henry, *On Barbarism*, p. 5.
65. Henry, p. 6.
66. Henry, p. 3.

barbarism," as Henry does, we name the possibility for the "destruction of the human being" as the brutality of narco-culture.

* * *

The thesis of the present work is that the kind of violence associated with the sociohistorical phenomenon known as narco-culture is such that it challenges our very conception of violence—that is, it makes us question what sort of violence we allow ourselves to accept as morally and rationally unproblematic outside the theater of war and inside the boundaries of contemporary civilized society. As a whole, this book offers a *philosophical* consideration on *extreme* and always *real* and *situated* violence and the different ways in which the violence of narco-culture as that extreme (and real and situated) violence has been rationalized, politicized, and institutionalized into the *being* of the everyday. In this way, narco-culture gives itself to our philosophical reflection as an opportunity for thinking the excesses of our own humanity and as a challenge to that thinking itself.

With this in mind, this chapter has sought to (1) outline what is meant by *narco-culture*, (2) highlight that which makes it distinct *as* culture (as opposed to being merely a sub- or counterculture), (3) delimit those characteristics that are essential to it, (4) situate it in the context of human coexistence as a possibility of an ethical being-with-others (i.e., as a real communal option or form of life), and (5) provide an entryway for the possibility of an edificatory philosophical interrogation.

Ultimately, narco-culture—as concept and reality—presents itself to us as a challenge. It forces us to question our notions of culture, politics, and even power, since it seems that violence is but an instrument of that power (as Hannah Arendt claims; see chapter 2) that consolidates narco-culture itself. After all, power—including the power over death, necropower or thanatological power—is strengthened with the accumulation of wealth, with the monopoly over trade routes and markets, with the ability to destroy competition and punish disloyalty. As fundamentally nourished by the neoliberal economic imperatives manifested in its moral and material excesses, narco-culture is an artifact of late capitalism. Its "business" depends on the threat and consummation of a brutal violence, one materialized in assassinations, decapitations, and the dissolving of bodies in barrels of acid (chapter 4). Excess in both power and violence

is the desired business modus operandi. The very notion of personhood fractures under the weight of these excesses, as persons become, as Borsò observes, "mere material" to be destroyed.

Finally, we insist that narco-culture is *culture* in essence and performance, but one constituted by the vulnerability of a seemingly inexhaustible number of disposable bodies and an apparently infinite quantity of expendable life. Certainly, there are class and economic elements to *el narco*—as the poor and the dispossessed are more likely to die for its cause—but narco-culture itself has no limits, and neither does its violence and its brutality, which, I will argue, reveal themselves in this cultural modality in their ontological truth as spaces of deconstruction and death (chapter 3). It is neither a subculture nor a fringe culture but a culture, pure and simple, structured by regulae (rules, values, and a politics of corruption, death, and excess) and common conceptions of the good life (and of the right death)—that is to say, by a common conception of what a good life (or a right death) *ought to be*.

CHAPTER 2

On Violence

OR, A PRIMER ON NARCO-VIOLENCE

Justice is in itself powerless: what rules by nature is force.

—Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*

NUMBERS

A headline from 2020 reads, "Mexico's Homicide Count in 2019 among Its Highest."[1] According to the official tally, cartel-related violence was responsible for 35,588 deaths that year (a 3 percent increase from the previous year). The number itself is straightforward and easy to grasp and articulate; however, the real human dead are not. Even when we try, our understanding fails us as we seek to visualize the persons that make up the number; we "see" the idea of a dead multitude but fail at seeing the reality. Human discernment falls short at picking out the parts from the whole, so we give up the effort, and death and its numbers, along with the brutality that brings it about, are accepted as a fait accompli, and "life goes on in apparent normality."[2] Clearly, a lack of a global reaction to such a number points to something more pernicious—namely, that the constant and pervasive violence that fuels narco-culture has *made us all* dependent on abstractions to the detriment of actual human beings.[3]

1. Sheridan, "Mexico's Homicide Count."
2. This is Ioan Grillo's way of referring to the manner in which Mexicans react to the everyday narco-related killings. See Grillo, "Paradox of Mexico's Mass Graves."
3. We will consider this process of abstraction or derealization in chapter 4.

Again, the culprit of the unprecedented death is suspected to be cartel violence. In Mexico, where narco-culture is ubiquitous, this inference is quickly made and quickly accepted. The rise in murders between 2006, when Mexico's current War on Drugs officially kicked off, and 2019 is striking. In 2006, only 2,200 murders related to cartel violence were reported.[4] The dramatic increase seen in 2019 could mean one of three things: (1) that the current numbers are misleading and are being manipulated for politics or propaganda, (2) that the criteria for what constitutes a cartel-related death have changed so that a death attributed to an "ordinary" drug deal gone wrong is now considered "cartel related," or (3) that cartel violence is, in fact, responsible for the deaths and that the violence is exponentially increasing year by year. Regardless of the real cause—whether political manipulation, legal policy, or cartel violence—the *suspicion* that the increase in deaths is cartel related is firmly justified by an all-inclusive cultural metanarrative in which politics and the laws that seek to curtail the death count are themselves responsive to a cultural modality that values extreme and lethal violence for the achievement of its own ends. That is, this metanarrative, itself legitimated by the spectacle of narco-bodies piled atop of bodies and shown nightly in the mass media, hides all other possible causal influences and points the finger directly at narco-culture. The 35,588 deaths are thus consumed by the metanarrative as statistics and abstractions, which means that they cannot be visualized or mourned and that *no one* is responsible. This is how the dead become a number, an idea, part of the "record" or constituents of a new "record"; in this sense, the thousands of dead lack reality and, ultimately, humanity.

As the dead are idealized, the violence that derealizes them becomes commonplace and itself becomes an abstraction.[5] A significant mechanism for the idealization and consumption of this everyday violence, and thus of the metanarrative, is the narco-corrido, a genre of music unique to narco-culture. Through the narco-corrido, the rules (the regulae) of narco-culture are disseminated, moments that have instituted the familiar violence are relived, the dead are counted and named, and narco-culture's

4. Burgos Dávila, "Narcocorridos," p. 174.

5. I borrow the notion of derealization from Judith Butler, who uses it in much the same way. See Butler, *Precarious Life*; and chapter 4 in this volume.

cultural profile is strengthened and delineated with the introduction of heroes, villains, and the all-too-common brutality that serves as its horizon.[6] It is thus imperative in our understanding of narco-culture and the narrative of violence and brutality that defines it to understand the narco-corrido as both a cultural product of narco-culture and a mechanism of ideological dissemination in the creation of that culture.

NARCO-CORRIDOS: A VIOLENCE TOLD

With one foot he pressed against his chest
With one hand he grabbed him by the hair
In his other hand he had the knife
He decapitated them, cut their throats
And next to their bodies left a message
That children should be respected.

Con un pie presionaba su pecho
Con una mano le agarró el pelo
En la otra mano tenía un cuchillo
Los decapitó les cortó el cuello
Y junto a él le dejo un mensaje
Que para los niños su respeto.

—Dinastía Norteña, "La venganza del M1"

Renowned folklorist Américo Paredes defines *corridos* as "narrative folk songs, especially those of epic themes, taking their name from *correr*, which means 'to run' or 'to flow,' for the *corrido* tells a story simply and swiftly, without embellishment."[7] As such, the corrido lends itself to the construction of cultural memory and to the constitution of objective history itself, since it means to tell an epic story objectively, or "without

6. A more nuanced reflection on narco-corridos would involve an entire project that I am not capable of undertaking here. Much has been written on the history, nature, and influence of narco-corridos both in the culture itself and outside the culture (as a source of information for Mexicans in the US, for instance). See, for example, Ramirez-Pimienta, *Cantar a los narcos*; and Wald, *Narcocorrido*.
7. Paredes, *"With His Pistol in His Hand,"* p. xi.

embellishment." To listen to a Mexican corrido is to be an active participant in the construction of memory and history; in a brief three to four minutes, one learns of a life that deserves emulation, a death that refuses to be forgotten, or a struggle fought for its own sake, unselfishly and honorably. In this act of active listening, one attends to the story, anticipating a lesson or looking for confirmation of one's own struggle given in the "epic" theme of the corrido. The music itself—the tonality, rhythm, and temporal structure—is secondary and only helps digest what is said. What one attends to, what one waits for, are the lyrics and what these convey. To listen to a narco-corrido, which is a variation of the corrido tradition, is thus to listen to a story, to anticipate a lesson or a new experience, but one about the narco way of life, or narco-culture, and its figures, its values, and its violent history.

And so it was with anticipation for an epic story that I listened to "La venganza del M1" by Dinastía Norteña on a typical morning commute. Up to that moment, I had listened to quite a few narco-corridos over the years and learned about the exploits of some of narco-culture's most influential heroes and antiheroes. The story flows through four verses before it arrives at the verse quoted above. The brutality of the act described shocked me; it disrupted both the temporal flow of the corrido as well as my expectation of what the story was supposed to be about. In that verse alone (and one can find many such verses in many other narco-corridos), I became acquainted for the first time with a kind of violence that seemed to be *more* violent than that with which I was familiar as well as with that more-than-violent violence that runs through the metanarrative of narco-culture.

The story itself is about a cartel figure known as M1 (Manuel Torres Félix), made famous by his bloodthirst and his penchant for the most brutal acts of violence—they also called him El Ondeado, which literally means "the crazy one" but is also a slang term that refers to one who has somehow "lost" his mind, who has lost his grip on reality mainly due to cocaine use and abuse. (His impressive narco-tomb is in Jardines de Humaya; see the introduction.) The corrido (one of many that tell the tale of this particular narco-figure) gives us an account of the reasons for M1's brutality and his lack of grip on reality. According to this myth, after enemies killed his son, he vowed to make everyone associated with

his son's murder pay with their lives. *Thousands* are said to have died at his own hands or by his orders.[8] According to the narco-corridos that bear his name, many of those were decapitated, cut to pieces while alive, or tortured to death in various other gruesome ways. His unquenchable thirst for vengeance, however, was more than the emotional reaction of one subject. M1's violent actions reaffirmed the notion that moral justifications for murder and brutality could be given in narco-culture (as irrational as they may seem to us)—justifications that likewise helped create the image of a cultural hero (or antihero), a hero embodying the qualities desired by the culture itself.

M1 was finally gunned down by the Mexican Naval Infantry Corps in October 2012—but not before placing in relief, in what we could call a preliminary fashion, the absolute brutality of narco-culture. Anecdotes from assassins and informants tell his story, but narco-corridos leave a lasting chronicle of M1's violent tendencies. Further exposure to narco-corridos make it clear that M1 was not an isolated case, and his apparent psychopathy was not unique; rather, M1's brutality was something like a shared cultural pathology, a cultural *condition*. We can thus say, in a general way, that narco-corridos depict that which is essential to narco-culture—namely, a violence that is gruesome, purposeful, and extreme and that transcends the psychology of particular individuals, ultimately resting in the structure of culture itself.

It could be said that I am putting too much weight on the narco-corrido as a source of justification for the claim that narco-culture is a violent culture. After all, it is just a song, and songs, as we know, are imaginative creations. We have already said that narco-corridos, if we put the matter abstractly (philosophically), are expressions of cultural memory, lyrically formed, and meant to transmit histories and narratives past the confines of political and social boundaries. As such, their social function is their communicative function. More specifically (less abstractly), just like corridos themselves, narco-corridos transmit stories whose epic theme is the narco form of life. But these are not made-up stories; the narco-corrido is supposed to tell a *real* story objectively and "without embellishment" or, barring that, a fictional story that is nonetheless reflective of the actuality

8. This is a common belief among residents of Culiacán, Sinaloa. Personal interviews.

of narco-culture. Cesar Burgos provides the following characterization of the narco-corrido: "What is characteristic of this tradition has been to compose, narrate, and sing real histories or fictitious histories based on events that impact the sensibilities of the people."[9] These events, whether real or marginally based on real life, are explicitly those related to and made possible by the business of narco-trafficking. This means that the events narrated in narco-corridos are violent events that, in the process of preserving them in song, are preserved in memory and go on to serve as profiles of the culture itself. Burgos continues, "The music of narcotrafficking forms a part of a social phenomenon with profound social and historical roots that have come to configure . . . narco-culture."[10]

If we return to the verse quoted above, which on the surface is merely a glorification of cold-blooded vengeance, we notice the symbiotic relationship between the events themselves and the music, where the events (M1, his actions, and his form of life) constitute culture while the song justifies the events (the murder of M1's son is given as justification for his actions or actions of the kind). We also notice that the violence exhibited by M1 toward his enemies (or the way it is described in the corrido) is of an excessive kind, yet it is an excessiveness suggested as necessary by the narco-corrido itself. It is excessive because of the way in which he decapitates his enemies—namely, with an almost intimate familiarity of the process (he does this with one hand!)—yet he acts as if the decapitation is necessary or, better yet, obligatory: the suggestion is that he goes to this extreme to uphold a rule, a *regula*, that *one's children are off-limits in the narco-war*. This extreme yet necessary kind of violence is the material violence of narco-culture; it is, to put it a different way, a situated, contextual violence, and it asks us to question the nature and limits of our abstract notions of violence—those that define our cultural narratives and our intersubjective negotiations.

Narco-corridos thus possess a constitutive power that both codifies the history of a culture and re-creates it in the event of their transmission. As the state struggles with narco-culture and the violence that constitutes it and with its own complicity in the illegal drug trade, it has found it

9. Burgos Dávila, "Narcocorridos," p. 158.
10. Burgos Dávila, p. 158.

necessary to outlaw narco-corridos and to do so "for the ethical protection of the youth."[11] This censure by the state, however, makes it more likely that narco-corridos will censure themselves less and hence be more revealing of the horrors of narco-culture's brutal violence. And with that, their reach will be even greater and more legitimate as a source of testimony and justification.

For those of us who stand outside the cultural geography of narco-culture, narco-corridos are the most direct source of information (and belief justification) regarding the history, the figures, and the happenings of *that* form of life. Narco-corridos point, as cultural signposts, to a reality that stands beyond our immediate experience (as Burgos says, "The compositions capture the reality of contemporary Mexican daily life"[12]) and invite us to approach it and "see for ourselves." Those of us who look beyond the mythology broadcast in the narco-corrido find a reality saturated with violence, yet one that lies in plain sight in the company of other, less gruesome narratives—for instance, mid-America's drug epidemic, the fall of this or that Mexican drug kingpin, and so on.

This is to say that beyond the dramatized violence of the narco-corrido, there is the real violence of narco-culture, a violence that is hard to grasp and even harder to articulate. While media reports attest to acts of violence on a daily basis (murders, extortions, kidnappings, dismemberments, assassinations, etc.), their pervasiveness and the excesses they communicate are not debated but met with acceptance and silence. Acapulco, which for decades was a vacation mecca for American tourists, has in the past six years ranked among the top five most violent cities in the world, so news reports of human remains scattered throughout the city, left in Styrofoam food containers or plastic bags,[13] are unsurprising and familiar—that is, no one finds them shocking, no one asks about the *who* or the *why*, and it is prima facie assumed that *this is* narco-culture. The realities of this culture are thus real and excessive. Narco-violence is a hyperviolence—a violence that, while articulated in the conceptual register of violence itself, is *more than violent*. It is a kind of violence that overflows

11. Burgos Dávila, p. 171.
12. Burgos Dávila, p. 175.
13. "Descuartizan a dos hombre en Acapulco."

its concept. In the next chapter, I make a case for calling this type of violence brutality. In order to make the case that brutality is *more than violence*, however, we must first consider the concept of violence itself.

CONCEPTIONS OF VIOLENCE

The pervasive and excessive violence recounted in narco-corridos refers to a real, situated human crisis. It is, moreover, a crisis that *demands* our attention, one that demands a response. It is not enough to point out the violence, to call it out; something must be said that sheds light on the crisis—on *the why* of a violence that is so excessive, it challenges the very limits of understanding. *We* are interrogated: Is the violence necessary? Is it senseless? Is there ever a reason for violence? If there are reasons for violence, can these reasons ever be *philosophically* justified? More importantly, and regardless of its reasons or justifications, *what do we mean* when we speak of violence?

The present chapter attempts to answer all these questions but particularly the last: To what does the concept of violence refer? Or, simply, what are those experiences to which this concept could refer so that we could say that our concept is fulfilled by a certain experience? In a general sense, violence will be understood either abstractly (the content that will fulfill the concept will be abstract) or materially (the content will be some fact or activity in the world). In the former case, we consider violence in its definition, as how it *should* be understood—I will refer to this conception of violence as its *analytical* conception. In the latter case, we consider violence in its givenness, in virtue of how it is experienced or the role it plays in human intersubjective relations—I will refer to this conception of violence as its *material* conception. In terms of its analytical conception, violence is thought of in terms of force or aggression. In terms of its material conception, violence is understood as either instrumental or phenomenological. Instrumental conceptions of violence are found in the works of those thinkers who conceive of violence in instrumental terms, such as Georges Sorel, Walter Benjamin, Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Hannah Arendt. We locate the phenomenological conceptions of violence, on the other hand, in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Because the analytical view simply clarifies the concept itself, I will begin with that

account. I will then discuss some instrumental views, and we will conclude the chapter by looking at the phenomenological view of Emmanuel Levinas, claiming that Levinas's conception holds promise for a deeper understanding of the violence of narco-culture—one that hints at *what we mean* when we speak of *excessive* or *unnecessary* violence.

Analytical Conceptions of Violence

The philosophy and sociology of violence are rich and their bibliographies extensive. I will not attempt to consolidate all or even most of the views on violence that have emerged in the long history of its study. My aim is modest: to settle on a *philosophical articulation* of violence that reveals violence as a horizon for the possibility of other acts that distinguish themselves both conceptually and materially from it—that is, acts that by being *more than* violent are *other than* violence.

What we may call the analytic conception of violence associates it with excessive force against another, against nature, against oneself, against text and ideas, and so on. We are said to use too much force when opening a door that slams against the wall; it is thought that we "opened the door violently." Alternatively, we are said to use excessive force when throwing a person from a ten-story building; we are said to have thrown the person "violently" to his or her death. (Consider the act of shoving a person from a ten-story building without much force, in which case it is not said that the person was "violently" shoved even if the final result was a violent death.) Indeed, force is in the etymology of the Latin *violentia—vis*, "force," and *latus*, "to take" or "to carry"—so that *violence* in its literal sense means "to carry out force," or to deploy force. In the context of politics or justice, where rights and obligations are at stake, harm is added to the definition. Thus we find *violence* defined in a contemporary dictionary of justice as "an action of exercising force against something or someone *producing harm*."[14]

We accept this definition: violence is force that causes harm. It is important to ask what we mean by *harm*. In a practical sense, harm is injury or damage—physical or mental or even symbolic. We harm someone or something when we damage them or it in some way. We can damage

14. Pereda, *Diccionario de justicia*, pp. 550–51 (my emphasis).

or injure something or someone gently, with minimal force, so that the violence inflicted seems barely noticeable. A mother speaking under her breath about her daughter's bad choices is damaging; the force that caused the damage, minimal. Or we can cause damage or injury with maximum force so that we all agree that the injury was violent. We think of a violent car crash or a decapitation. Hence violence is measured in degrees of force and injury. In the social sphere—the world of intersubjective negotiations, agreements, and sanctions—the greater the degree of force and injury, the more significant the violence and the more we speak about it, idealize it, and allow it to play a role in personal, cultural, and political matters.

Defined in this way, *any* act of force that produces *any* type of harm is violent. Thus my act of walking past a rose bush is violent if the wind produced by my stride forces a petal off a rose, thus harming the integrity of the rose. Similarly, my act of interpreting a Bible verse will be violent if I insist on (force) a certain meaning that injures your biblical sensibilities, your moral stance, or your life choices. Or if in interrupting you as you speak I hurt your sense of self-worth, then my act of interruption is violent. There is also the violence of aggression against ourselves or others; the violence of paradigm shifts, of new technological discoveries; and the violence of self-transformation—that is, of processes that transform history, the world, or ourselves into something new.

Regarding the violence of self-transformation, Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, speaks of the violence inherent in males' social education. Beginning in puberty, she writes, boys are given a "real apprenticeship in violence."[15] As they grow into adulthood, violence becomes a means to assert power, a means for self-affirmation:

> In the adult world, no doubt, brute force . . . haunts that world . . . for a man to feel in his fists his will to self-affirmation is enough to reassure him of his sovereignty. Against any insult, any attempt to reduce him

15. De Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, p. 308. Written halfway through the twentieth century, this observation does not cease to be true. In the context that currently has our attention, narco-culture, this is indeed the case. But in narco-culture, we could go further and say that the apprenticeship in violence begins much earlier; it begins soon after birth in stories of brutality and death that invade the home from all sides—for example, through music, folklore, and everyday chatter.

> to the status of object, the male has recourse to his fists, to exposure of himself to blows: he does not let himself be transcended by others, he is himself at the heart of his subjectivity. Violence is the authentic proof of man's loyalty to himself, to his passions, to his own will; radically to deny this will is to deny oneself any objective truth, it is to wall oneself in an abstract subjectivity. . . . It is a profound frustration not to be able to register one's feelings upon the face of the world.[16]

Thus violence is the way to authentic being, a way for a man to keep from being demeaned and humiliated into less-than being, into an object. The right to violence is identified with the right to exist, the right to be a subject. To deny *man* his right to violence is to dehumanize him or, as Judith Butler will say, to derealize him, as it is to "wall oneself in an abstract subjectivity." Of course, in both de Beauvoir and, later, Butler, this strategy of self-preservation is reserved for men in a male-centered world, where women, children, gays, lesbians, and minorities do not have recourse to violence as a strategy for self-affirmation or even for survival—where to "wall oneself in an abstract subjectivity" is a decision made on one's behalf and not an autonomous choice. The violence of self-preservation and self-transformation is harmful, always, *to someone*.

The point is that in the analytical conception of violence, violence is the causing of harm through force. We thus call "violent" any act that seems to intentionally seek to injure, corrupt, or harm. Some of these acts that cause harm through force are explicit (e.g., stabbing someone to death), while others are invisible to the perceptive understanding (e.g., racial or sexual discrimination). In his *On Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, Slavoj Žižek calls the violence that we see "subjective" and the "most visible" kind of violence.[17] There are other kinds of violence to which we attend in what follows—namely, the "subtle" or "symbolic" kinds of violence that are not directly visible, or what others conceive as instrumental, political, ideological, and ontological.

16. De Beauvoir, p. 309.
17. Žižek, *On Violence*, pp. 9–12.

Instrumental Conceptions of Violence

In its philosophical historiography, the analytical conception of violence is usually thought to entail its instrumentality—its usefulness as a means for the achievement of certain personal, social, political, or historical ends. For the most part, these ends are usually political, and so philosophers of violence maintain a certain generality in their philosophical pronouncements, speaking broadly about violence as a permanent condition of human sociality and about politics as the ways in which to deploy, control, or confront it.

Benjamin and Sorel

Famous among these reflections are Walter Benjamin's in his "Critique of Violence," where he writes,

> All violence as a means is either law-making or law-preserving. If it lays claim to neither of these predicates, it forfeits all validity. It follows, however, that all violence as a means, even in the most favorable case, is implicated in the problematic nature of law itself.[18]

While Benjamin goes on to argue against any sort of moral justification for violence, since it is always a manifestation of power and not of justice, he concedes that violence is actually necessary for the making or preservation of human laws. To make or preserve laws requires power, and power is, of necessity, violent.

In a more abstract yet still instrumental way, violence is thought to play a role in the movement of history itself; paradigm shifts and dialectical movements come about with the violent irruption of an established order, with the replacement of that order (its overcoming) with a new order, and this process is anything but comfortable. Thus G. W. Hegel's dialectic is violent, and so is Karl Marx's as well as Friedrich Engel's materialist interpretation of the same. However, we see it most clearly in Georges Sorel, who situates violence at the center of the class struggle. For Sorel, "violence has the additional effect of stimulating the class consciousness of the workers, of bringing vividly before them their sublime

18. Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," p. 287.

mission in history and, as a result, of incorporating their aspirations in the idea of the general strike."[19] On this account, violence plays a revelatory role, one that brings about class consciousness. But this is perhaps too soft a characterization of Sorel's vision. I say *too soft* because in his own "Reflections on Violence," Sorel seems to suggest that violence is nothing more than a weapon—an instrument at the disposal of the proletariat for the inevitable confrontation with "the middle-class corrupters" who have ruined society and its morals. He concludes his reflection in the following dramatic way:

> I have accomplished the task which I imposed upon myself; I have, in fact, established that proletarian violence has an entirely different significance from that attributed to it by superficial scholars and by politicians. In the total ruin of institutions and of morals there remains something which is powerful, new, and intact, and it is that which constitutes, properly speaking, the soul of the revolutionary proletariat. Nor will this be swept away in the general decadence of moral values, if the workers have enough energy to bar the road to the middle-class corrupters, answering their advances with the plainest brutality.[20]

Sorel's notion of "plainest brutality" here means real, physical force intended to cause harm that, if it causes enough harm, stops the advance of the "class corrupters." Violence, for Sorel, is thus necessary for the success of the struggle. The self-revelations that might go along with the exercise of the plainest brutality are secondary to the bashing of heads and the hoped-for victory. Sorel's political consideration of violence thus sees violence as a tool—one necessary for the movement of history or, better yet, for the liberation of the oppressed.

Fanon, Sartre, and Arendt

Violence as instrumental is easy to grasp. We only have to think of how violence or the threat of violence kept us in our place as children. The fear of my father's violence was prohibitive and, I later realized, formative.

19. Laidler, *History of Socialism*, pp. 302–3.
20. Sorel, "Reflections on Violence," p. 368.

A more radical view of instrumental violence is found in Frantz Fanon. In Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), we get a view of violence as emancipatory. As for Sorel, for Fanon, violence is a form of "mediation," a necessary step in overcoming oppressive or colonizing conditions. The violence of rebellion—of resistance, of protest—is necessary work for this cause. As Fanon writes, "For the colonized, this violence represents the absolute praxis. . . . Violence can thus be understood to be the perfect mediation. The colonized man liberates himself in and through violence."[21] Put differently, participation in violence is a *means* to detach oneself from conditions of colonization. With a violent act, I am no longer adhering to the rules of my oppression; I am *other* to it, and I am also *the same* with those with whom I participate in violent struggle. Fanon gives us the example of revolutionary groups forcing their members to minimally participate in an "irreversible act" as a form of initiation and, in a more important sense, solidarity. Once a violent act is committed in common—say, killing another—there is no turning back, no way to "rejoin the colonized system" because "everyone was thus personally responsible for the death of the victim."[22] Thus, Fanon writes, "the violence of the colonized . . . unifies people."[23]

This notion of violence as a necessary step in the process of liberation or as unifying that we find in both Sorel and Fanon makes sense in nonrevolutionary contexts as well. Narco-soldiers, for whom participation in the violence of the narco form of life is a way *out of* poverty and social marginalization, will certainly see their violence as liberating and unifying; in doing a brutal, otherwise unspeakable deed, that is, they constitute themselves as trusted members of the group (the cartel), unified in solidarity. Of course, this kind of unifying and liberating violence does not make sense in *every* context, nor does it always make sense in those contexts in which it makes sense *sometimes*. Later I will claim that certain acts of "senseless" brutality (for instance, the murdering of an entire family so as to send a message regarding territory or trafficking routes) have no liberating or unifying qualities.

21. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 44.
22. Fanon, p. 44.
23. Fanon, p. 51.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his introduction to *The Wretched of the Earth*, endorses Fanon's view of violence. He writes that Fanon "shows perfectly clearly that . . . irrepressible violence is neither a storm in a teacup nor the reemergence of savage instincts nor even a consequence of resentment: it is man recreating himself."[24] Sartre's interpretation of violence here is simply that in colonized settings, violence allows the colonized to recover her identity, to assert her humanity, and to reconstruct herself. The question that arises, however, is *how much violence* is enough for the recreation or reconstruction to be complete. It seems that the *construction* of subjectivity itself is endless and complex, involving the prior construction of community and world; thus it would seem that the reconstruction of subjects through violence would be equally endless. Violence would then be a permanent state of existence, as one is in a perpetual process of self-reconstruction that ends only in death.

This is what Hannah Arendt criticized in Sartre's endorsement of Fanon's notion of violence in *On Violence*. While Arendt does agree with Fanon's interpretation of violence as instrumental, as a means to an end, she does not see why it must be necessary for the reconstruction of man. She considers Sartre's Hegelian-Marxist roots. Hegel, she argues, proposes that persons "produce" themselves through thought, while Marx believes the same occurs through labor, and both thought and labor express a certain "rebellion against the very factuality of the human condition,"[25] which may be perceived as violent. Nonetheless, she concludes, "a gulf separates the essentially peaceful activities of thinking and laboring from all deeds of violence."[26] In this context, Arendt sets out to clarify the notion of violence once and for all. In general, she challenges the popular conceptions of violence that either propose violence as a necessary step for the development of the human person or seem to conflate violence with legitimacy, state power, authority, or strength.

According to a popular conception, "Violence is nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power."[27] Again, that violence is one of the ways in which power is expressed ignores the fact that many violent

24. Fanon, p. lv.
25. Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 13.
26. Arendt, p. 13.
27. Arendt, p. 35.

acts do not relate to power at all. For instance, the violence of an accident says nothing of power, and yet the accident is still a violent event. What ultimately distinguishes power from violence, according to Arendt, is that "power stands in need of numbers, whereas violence up to a point can manage without them because it relies on implements."[28] In this sense, the 35,588 deaths resulting from cartel-related violence in Mexico in 2019 serve power. However, what Arendt herself cannot account for is that the number *also* serves violence, since it makes the quantity of dead acceptable (or digestible) by being abstract. This social definition of power asserts that power manifests itself as a unity of subjectivities that come together to exert their will "in concert,"[29] while violence does not require any such unity or concert, since its "instrumental character"[30] means that any individual (alone) can exercise it.

Arendt agrees with Sorel and Sartre: violence is thus always a means to an end. This also means that on its own, violence cannot legitimize anything; as a means, it requires a justification for itself and so cannot be a justification for something else. As Arendt writes, "Like all means, [violence] always stands in need of guidance and justification through the end it pursues."[31] We are mistaken, therefore, to think that violence will legitimize power or justify strength, since, in essence, it can do neither. Power, on the other hand, *can* justify violence, which proves one of Arendt's points—namely, that violence and power are not the same.

Arendt's instrumental definition of violence shows that violence is usually unnecessary for the attainment of ends that are constructive, or positive, as philosophers like Sartre have insisted. It cannot justify its ends, whatever they may be; what it can do, and what it does, is perpetuate itself in ways that destroy ends, such as power, strength, unity, community, and so on. Arendt writes, "The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world."[32] This has been the case in Mexico's fight with narco-criminality. The state,

28. Arendt, p. 42.
29. Arendt, p. 44.
30. Arendt, p. 46.
31. Arendt, p. 51.
32. Arendt, p. 80.

in its effort to quell the rise in violent deaths, resorts to violent means, continuing a self-perpetuating cycle that is seemingly endless. Journalist Javier Valdez Cárdenas, himself murdered in 2017 by cartel hit men, put it thus: "I believe that the violence, what we call narco-violence, will continue. . . . [The federal government] will only provoke more dead, more violence, and more of our common fear as a form of life."[33] In Mexico, that is, the "violent world" that Arendt fears is destined to become a "form of life" due to what Cárdenas recognized as the self-generating nature of violence.

We thus return to the Sartre-inspired question posed above: How much violence is enough to reproduce the human being? The answer is that no amount of violence will be enough to reproduce or reconstruct the human being because while violence will simply reproduce itself perpetually, humankind's insatiable appetite will hunger for another, more fulfilling reconstruction.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL ENTRYWAYS

As we saw with the analytical conception of violence, violence is thought to be any force that causes harm. The instrumental conception takes this a step further and suggests that violence is any force that causes harm that also has some utility or lends itself to some end. There is also what I am calling a *phenomenological* conception of violence, where the emphasis is not on violence as force or violence as utility but on the radical or originary experience of violence as interruption, interference, suspension, and so on—that is, any experience of a radical discontinuity or change. In this conception, violence is usually framed as a generic state of our being—as a permanent state of human existence, of being itself—in which what *there is* is always under threat of interruption, modification, sublation, and so on. Because of its originary, existential nature, violence characterizes our radical, most intimate, pretheoretical experience of the world; it marks our language, our silence, our reading, our writing, our social interactions, the flutter of a butterfly's wings, and so on. In this phenomenological

33. Castrillón, "Río Doce."

characterization, violence cannot be appropriated as an instrument, nor can it be evaluated through normative metrics. In this view, violence is the world in flux—what happens, *how* it happens—and it gives itself in interruption, interference, intervention, interpretation, and so on, all generally conceived, so that the water coming out of a showerhead is violent as it speeds out of the nozzle with its own (nonethical) force and aggressiveness. Similarly, an intense glance is violent when it appears overly hard or penetrating, and so on.

We can thus talk about a spectrum of violence, one where on one extreme, we have a violent armed conflict; on the other, the bad interpretation of a good poem (or the good interpretation of a bad poem). This spectrum can be said to constitute the limits of the concept of violence itself. We can also say that the spectrum is the horizon of violence. From the point of view of the violence horizon, we can make sense of the myriad ways in which violence manifests itself in everyday life. Real, material, and visceral acts of violence—those that inflict suffering, death, and destruction on persons or communities—find their fit within this spectrum or horizon; likewise, ideas of violence that characterize it as redeeming and constitutive of subjectivity (Sorel's, for instance) can also be found in this horizon.

This horizon or spectrum of violence also contains idealizations of violence, or violence in the abstract, even though it is harder to see how violence in the abstract fits into the spectrum. If we look at violence in the abstract—for instance, violence as a break in the continuity of being—we are unable to grasp it without an attendant image of what it is that is being "broken," what continuity is being interrupted, or how being is changed as a result. This suggests that violence in the abstract does not give itself *in itself*. It is difficult (or impossible) to attend to violence on its own, abstracted or ripped from its particularity—that is, from those events that mark its particular occurrence so as to be left with violence in its "pure" form. In its pure form, violence simply conforms to its definition (the analytic conception) and is merely a concept signifying force without its normative (ethical or moral) dimension (viz., force that harms). As a concept, it can then be applied to a disruptive, interrupting force inherent in any act that awakens or provokes, such as reading, writing, linguistic

analysis,[34] or social organization.[35] In this abstracted state, violence is merely a predicate—something we can attribute to something else but not a phenomenon that gives itself without content.

As we raise violence to this level of abstraction, it becomes mysteriously spectral. We cannot see it itself, although we can see it attached to some other event (for instance, we see the violence in the mutilated body but not without it). James Dodd notes that "in all cases," violence "eludes our grasp—whether as empty, impossible to accept or a foregone conclusion."[36] Thus a proper phenomenological—or even a proper philosophical—account of violence will be limited by the way in which violence gives itself so that the "act" in the "violent act" will necessarily obscure a clear intuition of what makes it violent. Dodd writes,

> The problematic sense of violence straddles, in a fluid and anarchic way, the divide between sense and non-sense, between clarity and obscurity; it is thus not simply a question of cause and effect, of where violence comes from and where it is going, but how violence manifests itself within a human situation or world.[37]

In other words, the problem is that violence does not give itself straightforwardly (as, for instance, an object or an event can); furthermore, it cannot be isolated from its social (and thus historical) situation, which means it cannot be *an* object of something like a phenomenological epoche, which could let us see it in its abstractness. To grasp the sense of violence, one is forced to consider it *together with* the complex in which it is given or the acts that give it. Dodd concludes, "To a great extent violence is marked by a peculiar *refusal of phenomenality* itself."[38]

I partially agree with Dodd that violence *refuses phenomenality*. If violence does refuse phenomenality, or givenness, it is not because it lacks it.

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34. See, for instance, Pagès, "Fenomenología, violencia, y deconstrucción."
35. See, for example, the important volume by Thompson and Embree, *Phenomenology and the Political*.
36. Dodd, *Violence and Phenomenology*, p. 15.
37. Dodd, p. 15.
38. Dodd, p. 16 (my emphasis).

It refuses phenomenality only because it need not give it. In my view, it is not so much that violence refuses phenomenality as it is the case that its methods are oversaturated with givenness. When our attention turns to violence, we are focused not on violence itself but on the ways or methods whereby the act or event is violent. In other words, we turn to the events in which violence appears and then make judgments about the event's place in the violence horizon or spectrum. Thus rather than violence refusing its own phenomenality or givenness, it is we, in the processes of our intentionality, who are incapable of seeing it.

As such, we grasp violence in its aftermath, in its chaos, in its interventions, in its intensity, or in its intentionality. We grasp violence not in itself but always already in those events or occurrences that interrupt our focus or intervene with the flow of consciousness in daily life. Moreover, we judge the violence of those events or occurrences within the spectrum or horizon of violence outlined above; we judge violence within the limits of its concept. We are then at a loss when an act presents itself as overly saturated with violence, as overflowing its concept, or as breaking out of the spectrum or horizon. It is this violence that, as more-than-violence, is no longer violence, which I call brutality. Although its appearance emerges from a horizon of violence, as we understand it or fail to understand it in and of itself, brutality is not identical to violence. It is more than that. Brutality is what we grasp without understanding but cannot "see" when we announce the *excessiveness* of violence; brutality is what we fear *but of which we cannot speak* when a violent act shocks us and leaves us without words. In this sense, violence is the confrontation between cartel assassins and the state police that leaves countless dead; brutality is the decapitation of a father and the disembowelment of his family that preceded it—that which has us saying, "This is too much." While violence remains but a concept that points to the force of interruption, intervention, and dislocation, brutality as a concept tries to capture something more—that is, the *shock*, the disbelief, the unsayability, or the excess violence of decapitation, of dismemberment, or of the "unthinkable" destruction of the human being.

On Originary Violence

A persistent claim of this book is that the horizon or the spectrum of violence cannot contain the reality of brutality. Underlying this claim is the view that violence is one thing and brutality another; violence is internal to the permanent field of being, while brutality is an emergence, something more than violence. This is because whether one subscribes to the instrumental or the noninstrumental view of violence, there is a sense in which violence is thought to be necessary and omnipresent, which accounts for us having a spectrum or a horizon of violence in the first place. However, why say that violence is necessary or pervasive? And how does it become something else?

Emmanuel Levinas's phenomenology helps us approach these questions. Levinas's phenomenological ethics begins with a critique of traditional conceptions of philosophy in which "Reason" is given sovereignty over all things human, a move that leads ultimately to a leveling of difference and a promotion of similarities ("sameness") for the sake of rational calculation and effective understanding of human conduct (i.e., knowledge).[39] Ultimately, the hegemony of the "Rational" imposes itself on human sociality in the form of politics, whose end is the administration of war. Levinas writes, "The art of foreseeing war and winning it by any and every means—politics—is henceforth enjoined as the very exercise of reason. Politics is opposed to morality, as philosophy to naivete."[40]

In building toward his phenomenological ethics, Levinas begins with the insight that the moment when an existent (self-consciousness) emerges from the anonymity of *being* (what he calls the "there is," or the *il y a*) is a moment of originary violence. "Consciousness," he says in *Time and the Other*, "is a rupture of the anonymous vigilance of the *there is*."[41] In other words, the appearance of *self*-awareness from the general, "impersonal 'field of forces' of existence" or from the "murmur of silence"[42]—or as Edith Wyschogrod describes it, the "prematapysical unity" of thought and being[43]—is a moment of primordial violence. This

39. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*.
40. Levinas, p. 21.
41. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, p. 51.
42. Levinas, p. 46.
43. Wyschogrod, "Derrida, Levinas, and Violence," p. 185.

rupture disrupts, disturbs, interrupts, displaces, and dislocates; it is thus a necessary violence required for there to be an "I" that will ultimately have to reckon with "an other."

The reckoning of one with an other will necessarily involve this originary violence. The confrontation and subsequent struggle of consciousnesses midway through Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* show that a basic demand for recognition can necessitate some sort of violent conflict. For Levinas, the appearance of the third consciousness, or the third person, creates even more demands and more conflicts. Thus the appearance of the third, he says, is the origin for the need for justice; it is the "hour" to set the rules of the encounter in an effort to protect the vulnerable and the naked.[44] Furthermore, this is the moment for a philosophical gesture, which in its description will reveal that vulnerability and that nakedness; it will be a phenomenology that matters, since the nakedness and vulnerability in which the other appears are already "an exposure unto death."[45]

The violence present at the moment of the I's or "Ego's" emergence out of the *anonymous field of forces of existence* persists through the death of another by my hands or the hands of a neighbor; this is what we call murder. Murder is already a possibility for an Ego who is always already *for another* or, as Levinas says, the "hostage of the other person."[46] The other—as vulnerable, as separated, as difference—is, Levinas says in *Totality and Infinity*, "the sole being I can wish to kill."[47]

Why the wish to kill the other? I wish to kill the other because his separation from me makes him an enigma, an unknown that escapes my comprehension; killing the other reduces him to an intelligible datum—a "sensible datum"—that I can digest or "neutralize." Levinas writes, "To kill is not to dominate but to annihilate: it is to renounce comprehension absolutely."[48] Thus murder is the absolute manifestation of a will to ignorance, the final surrender of epistemological lust. If the other cannot be known, then he must be killed. Thus violence negates the other's separation, it annuls her independence from my gaze and my reach, and it

44. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, p. 106.
45. Levinas, p. 107.
46. Levinas, p. 107.
47. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 198.
48. Levinas, p. 198.

does so by acts directed not at her humanity but at her eternal difference. Levinas concludes, "Murder alone lays claim to total negation."[49]

In this way, murder is an extreme and final act of comprehension (or totalization or subjection) after the possibilities of the encounter are exhausted. Murder is on the extremity of the spectrum. The violence that precedes murder takes the form of suppression or oppression or marginalization. Levinas says,

> Violence itself does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating persons as in interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitments but their own substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility for action.[50]

Violence, in other words, is coercive and, through this process of coercion, constitutive. It is not constitutive in the Sorelian or Sartrean sense that it brings about a consciousness of an individual's own subjectivity (re-creating); rather, it is constitutive in the negative sense that it transforms persons into inauthentic representations of themselves (it is, in this sense, dehumanizing). The violence that precedes murder interrupts the continuity of persons—their living experience, their future, and their projects. The interruption (violence itself) suddenly limits the possibilities of fulfillment, thus "making them play roles"—being what they are not and what they are not supposed to be.

Violence is thus an originary interruption. We return again to the vagueness of the term, since we could say, alternatively, that all interruptions are violent. Thus the interruption of the speaker by a heckler is violent if the speaker is now forced to change her speech, deflect, defend, and address what she did not plan on addressing; she has betrayed her commitment and must now risk losing the point of her speech. Similarly, the interruption of my sleep by a loud noise is violent precisely because the continuity of my slumber was suddenly disrupted.

49. Levinas, p. 198.
50. Levinas, p. 21.

Violence turns out to be a fundamental relational characteristic of human sociality. Violence is the horizon of the social. In this horizon, we find the necessary violence of discourse and the transformative interruptions that redirect one's life as well as those that end it: murder, death. "In death," Levinas writes with poetic beauty, "I am exposed to absolute violence, to murder in the night."[51] It is "murder in the night" because death comes from nowhere (it is "absolutely unforeseeable"[52]) and brings about an interruption that prohibits all continuity, any chance of assuming a new role or a new vital project. And although we believe that death will come on its own and on its own time, the other (the other person) represents she who can bring it about either now or in the future. Hence "the violence of death threatens as tyranny through proceeding for a foreign will"[53]—namely, the will of another.

This other—who is absolutely unknowable, ungraspable, and incomprehensible—is also my greatest threat, as she is the one who can kill me. This other is the constant representation of my possible death. Experiencing the other as the possibility of my own death means that I am also the other's possible death; I am also a threat. This immediate experience of threat, of fear of otherness, points to a vulnerability at the heart of human sociality where both agents are apprehensive of each other. Levinas says, "Murder, at the origin of death, reveals a cruel world, but one to the scale of human relations,"[54] which means simply that human relations are intrinsically cruel (or brutal, as I will claim).

From Phenomenology to a Philosophy of Narco-Violence

In narco-culture, the repetition and omnipresence of murders and assassinations could serve as the material for a phenomenology of cruelty such as we find in Levinas. The omnipresence of death certainly points to an essential vulnerability at the heart of human relations that could be revealed by such a study. Levinas himself describes this vulnerability as the "essential mortality of the will"[55]—an essential being-toward-death

51. Levinas, p. 233.
52. Levinas, p. 235.
53. Levinas, p. 234.
54. Levinas, p. 236.
55. Levinas, pp. 236–37.

that exposes human interiority to "seduction, propaganda, and torture."[56] That is, our will, our interior self, thinks itself immortal and incorruptible by virtue of its power to transcend immediacy, but as it succumbs to exterior influences, it is reduced to a "force of nature, absolutely tractable . . . exposed to influences"[57]—to a penetrable thing that can be destroyed, erased, or brutally murdered. Our vulnerability is thus due to the confluence of a false conception we have of ourselves as permanent and incorruptible (our will, we think, is immortal) and the fact that our will can be, and often is, influenced, grasped, and submissive. Levinas says that "the will remains on this moving limit between inviolability and degeneration."[58] Moreover, so long as the will is on this limit, it poses a threat to other wills (other interiorities) by virtue of its vulnerability, as it thinks of everything as a threat and seeks to protect itself through a similar kind of violence as that which it thinks will be inflicted upon it.

Violence thus becomes necessary for an Ego that in the vulnerability of its exposed being seeks to guard itself from murder. Echoing Levinas, Judith Butler offers us an opportunity to transition from the account of originary violence we find in Levinas to that of narco-brutality we are seeking to highlight here. Butler writes,

> To the extent that we commit violence, we are acting on another, putting the other at risk, causing the other damage, threatening to expunge the other. . . . This vulnerability, however, becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions, especially those in which violence is a way of life and the means to secure self-defense are limited.[59]

Similar to Levinas, Butler conceives of violence as essentially related to the other—to "acting on another." There is a recognition in her account of the corresponding relation between vulnerability and violence: the more vulnerable one is, the more one seeks to protect oneself and thus engage in preemptive violence or the easier it is for one to be reduced to an object, dehumanized, and murdered. This is because, as Levinas writes,

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56. Levinas, p. 237.
57. Levinas, p. 237.
58. Levinas, p. 237.
59. Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 29.

"murder still aims at a sensible datum, and yet it finds itself before the datum whose being cannot be *suspended* by an appropriation. It finds itself before a datum absolutely non-neutralizable."[60] Moreover, Butler notes, the necessity to neutralize the other human being, to reduce him to a "sensible datum," is a necessity in those cultural, historical, social, or political conditions where "violence is a way of life"—for instance, in narco-culture.

Narco-culture, in its material structure—one constituted by a politics and economics of competition and excess—is thus that form of life where the other can be reduced to an object, where killing him is legitimated under its own rules. Allowing the other to be more than a "sensible datum" would imply a recognition and acceptance of one's own moral obligations to that other, a recognition that has no place in a culture of violence where the goal is the conspicuous consumption of resources, be they money or people. Narco-culture is a culture of killing—a culture where, as Levinas writes, "to kill is not to dominate but to annihilate; it is to renounce comprehension absolutely."[61] Because only the human other frustrates me in this way—that is, in his refusal to allow me to know him absolutely or know his intentions[62]—he is the only one who poses a real risk (as competition) to my independence and threatens my vulnerability. Thus, Levinas says, "the other is the sole being I can wish to kill."[63]

This "wish to kill" is reflected in the hundreds of thousands of narco-related deaths in Mexico. We can certainly read these deaths as resulting from the frustrated attempt by some to have others bend to their will—a frustration that ends either by calling those that do not bend "enemies" or by seeking to annihilate them by any means necessary. As Butler puts it,

> Violence is surely a touch of the worst order, a way a primary human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way, a way

60. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 198.
61. Levinas, p. 198.
62. As opposed to say, an animal, whose dissection, DNA testing, and so on will offer all the knowledge I wish to have of it.
63. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 198.

> in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, a way in which life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another.[64]

The wish to kill can achieve cultural normalcy when, in a culture in which violence is a way of life, the "willful action" of others seeks but fails to completely subjugate the other. There, killing appears as the *only* option.

The wish to kill has achieved cultural normalcy in the cultural modality under discussion here. As Alondra Aguilar writes, "The people that are part of narco-culture demonstrate an attitude of predominance, of feeling owners of everything that surrounds them (including people) and that, in a way that is dangerous to social coexistence."[65] Ultimately, the illegal foundation (economic as well as political) on which narco-culture rests, both locally and internationally, justifies the wish to kill and the attitude of predominance that is necessary for personal survival. However, if the juridical apparatus of the state is incapable of combating these wishes and attitudes that necessitate brutality, then society is bound to revert to an absolute chaos, a state of war of all against all.

What we get from the phenomenological account of Levinas (and later Butler) is merely an interpretation of violence, cruelty, and brutality as essential characteristics of human coexistence—characteristics that both ethics and law aim to control and overcome, a generally successful attempt. When it comes to narco-culture, understood as a cultural phenomenon that inverts the value of justice and morality, any phenomenological observation is merely a "distanciation" (as Paul Ricoeur would say in regard to interpretation[66]) whereby the reality of narco-culture is underdetermined by its phenomenality.

"ESTO NO ES UNA ENFERMEDAD; ES VIOLENCIA"

A popular phrase that appears in several songs by artists of the narco-corrido genre tells us that the happenings of narco-culture are not symptoms of a social affliction or a societal disease; the happenings are simply

64. Butler, *Precarious Life*, pp. 27–28.
65. Aguilar, "Una peligrosa admiración."
66. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*.

the happenings of an accepted violence. The popular group Voz de Mando interrupts one of their songs and tells us, "And remember, this is not a sickness; this is violence" (Y recuerden, esto no es una enfermedad; es violencia).[67] With this, the poets of the culture remind us that violence is a permanent condition of that particular culture, that it is what defines it. Violence is not a symptom of something else (*no es una enfermedad*); it is the culture itself (*es violencia*).

Hence the attempt has been made in this chapter to consider how previous conceptions of violence might fit into our reflections of narco-culture. As we have seen, an effective philosophical analysis of narco-culture must quickly turn to the tools and methodologies, theories and thinkers in political philosophy—for example, Hannah Arendt and Frantz Fanon. We propose, however, that while social and political theorists will craft an analysis in which the breakdown of either common-sense rationality or the political itself is mainly to blame for the rise of those regimes of necro- and narco-power that have established themselves as cultural markers in places such as Mexico, Central America, and Colombia, these accounts will leave out the subtle (yet most concrete) ways in which these regimes normalize the dehumanization of human life through justified cultural practices of (extreme and unspeakable) violence toward the other.

Narco-culture is complex, as is the violence that defines it. Vittoria Bòrso considers it a culture of extremes, referring to the "bipolarity of narcoculture." At one pole, she notes, are culture and those productions that constitute culture in general (music, film, literature, fashion, religion, etc.); at the other pole, however, we have what Bòrso, following Roberto Esposito, calls "the regime of thanatological power for those for whom life is mere 'material,' bare life in the sense of Agamben, material that can be annihilated without this act entering the sphere of the punishable."[68] It is this second pole of the bifurcation that demands the philosophical intervention that I am attempting here. It is the exercise of "thanatological power" with impunity that calls on our moral conscience to intervene, and it is the treatment of others as "mere 'material,'" as faceless matter,

67. Voz de Mando, "El Hummer y el Camaro."
68. Bòrso, "Narcocultura," p. 2.

that challenges our humanity. The regime of thanatological power that underlies narco-culture is more than a violent regime, more than a regime that authorizes death and cruelty; it is a regime of brutality. In the following chapter, I will make these distinctions more explicit.

Reflecting on narco-culture, we see that the circularity of violence envisioned by Arendt and predicted by Cárdenas has come to pass. In that context, violence gives way to violence, and more violence gives way to more violence, and so on. How can we explain this? One way to do so is to focus on what violence accomplishes, on its materiality or instrumentality, as Arendt and Fanon show. Another more abstract and philosophical way is to determine the extent to which violence is a response to a basic human vulnerability exposed in our primordial being-with-others—to ask, *What does violence do to our very humanity*? That is the question of chapter 4. For now, we think along the lines suggested by the narco-corridos—namely, that violence defines the form of life that is narco-culture or, as we put it above, that violence is the horizon in which narco-culture fulfills its possibilities. Violence as horizon or as predicate, however, fails to capture the realities that those same narco-corridos describe—that is, narco-violence in its own way transcends violence as force, violence as interruption, and violence as instrument and rests in the unimaginable, the unspeakable, and the unthinkable.

We are no longer talking about violence as we know it or fail to know it; we are talking about brutality.

CHAPTER 3

On Brutality

OR, TOWARD A PHILOSOPHY OF UNSPEAKABLE VIOLENCE

> Without sensibility no object would be given to us; and without understanding no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind. Hence it is just as necessary that we make our concepts sensible (i.e., that we add the object to them in intuition) as it is necessary that we make our intuitions understandable (i.e., that we bring them under concept).
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> —Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*

Operating in the background of the present investigation into the violence of narco-culture is an abstract concern with certain related concepts, the intuitions that fulfill them, and the real, existential significance of this fulfillment. The concepts in question are culture, violence, brutality, and personhood; the intuitions are those experiences/acts that are *added* to them so as to make them "sensible," as Kant says, and the manner in which this is achieved—or, the manner in which this achievement *fails*, as when that which is experienced is deficient to the concept or *excessive* to it.

While those abstract concerns operate in the background, presently we think about narco-culture and, on the basis of that thinking, proceed to disentangle violence from brutality, brutality from cruelty, and brutality from violence while simultaneously lending particular attention to the way in which their fulfillment is achieved or the ways in which this fulfillment fails in that particular context. The stakes in this investigation

are twofold: on the one hand, we gain a better appreciation of the (real or ideal) value of our moral judgments regarding narco-culture or other cultural modalities constituted by violence and death; on the other hand, we gain a clearer picture of the manner in which these cultural modalities, such as narco-culture, maintain and perpetuate themselves through the production, repetition, and *objectification* of a violence that exceeds its concept—namely, *extreme violence against another person*, what here I call brutality, and the dehumanizing objectifications that brutality in turn creates and on which it depends.

Thus a conclusion of the present work (if I am allowed to speak of a heterogeneity of conclusions, which I believe matters like these demand) will be that the pervasiveness of brutality (i.e., of excessive, objective, and ultimately unspeakable violence) in the social or cultural sphere marks the moment when the absolute derealization of persons becomes possible. The sublation of violence by brutality points to the normalization of brutality in the everydayness of cultural life (as we see in narco-culture) and the derealization that is actualized in the reduction of persons (i.e., of their bodies, their personalities, and their existence) to mere ideas or objects incapable of demanding or deserving respect, recognition, or sympathy.[1]

While the conclusion that brutality brings about the absolute derealization of persons may seem obvious, we will see how this obviousness is lost in the carelessness in which violence, brutality, and cruelty operate in the economy of philosophical discourse—one in which Sartre, for instance, credits "irrepressible violence" with making possible the "reconstruction" of man.[2] Sartre certainly does not pause to consider what it means for violence to be "irrepressible" or to wonder about the possible perversions of the "reconstruction"—a perversion that tends not toward reconstruction but toward objectification and derealization. Prying our concepts apart allows us to see that violence, when it is "irrepressible" (or "unthinkable" or "unspeakable"), is no longer violence but brutality;

1. I am using *sublation* here in its Hegelian sense of *Aufheben* or *Aufhebung*—as the negation, preservation, and transcendence of one term by another. See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, section 68: "Sublation exhibits its true twofold meaning which we have seen in the negative: it is at once a negating and a preserving."
2. See chapter 2 in this volume.

that brutality, as *more than violence*, is *other than cruelty*; and that, phenomenologically, brutality gives itself as that which oversaturates our concept of violence. That is, brutality overflows this concept of violence with intuitions of *excessive force, harm, ruin, and devastation perpetrated against others*—with specific and spectacular acts of (visible or apparent) intentional force, harm, ruin, and devastation that offend and surprise our sensibilities by seeming to be *more than* what is required for the punishment, harming, or annihilation of persons. Thus in Kant's sense, rather than being empty, the concept of violence overflows and is exceeded by the intuitive violence given.[3] These conclusions and observations are lost to us because our concept of violence simply fails to capture the excess, and cruelty (meant in everyday use as subjective violence tied to individual psychology), which is what is often used in its place, does not apply to the case of *culture*, as we will see.[4] Understanding that brutality is that *surplus* of violence that *transgresses* the limits of violence, we can then give a name to that which is unspeakable, unimaginable, or irrepressible in our experiences of the others' suffering, ruin, and destruction—experiences that in their excessiveness offend our moral sensibilities and challenge our thinking.

3. A good example of how these concepts are used interchangeably can be found in Siniša Malešević's *The Rise of Organised Brutality: A Historical Sociology of Violence*. As in the title itself, in which the author clearly identifies brutality with violence, the text makes no distinction among violence, brutality, and cruelty and, in fact, uses them interchangeably to all mean the *same thing*: violence. A telling paragraph is found in its first pages:

> None of this is to say there was no violence or cruelty in premodern times. On the contrary, violence was an important mechanism of social control, and the periodic, but mostly sporadic, instances of excessive cruelty were integral to the various justice systems and to some practices of warfare. The point is that the cruelty was not part of everyday life, and its intermittent gruesome practice should not be confused with its pervasiveness. . . . The use of torture is often a sign of coercive weakness rather than strength, and those who rely on macabre killings regularly lack other organizational means to inflict large-scale casualties. (p. 2)

4. Narco-culture shows that our concepts fail us, especially our concept of violence. In such cases, we must have the courage to invent new ones or rethink our old ones. As Giorgio Agamben writes, "There is a moment in the life of concepts when they can lose their immediate intelligibility and can then, like all empty terms, be overburdened with contradictory meanings." Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 80.

The unspeakable violence that exceeds the concept of violence permeates narco-culture. By mid-2017, narco-culture's irrepressible violence had created the "second deadliest conflict zone in the world after Syria."[5] These excesses, represented in the widespread practice of kidnapping, torture, dismemberment, targeted assassinations, and the like, threaten the integrity and possibilities of human flourishing of real persons and communities. Articulating these excesses is required for the appropriate kinds of interventions to take place—sociological, political, religious, and so on. The present philosophical intervention aims to make those distinctions that may allow us to better describe those violent experiences that otherwise seem indescribable. One of these is between violent excesses carried out by individuals for their own pleasure (cruelty) and those violent excesses that seem to be carried out for the sake of others—for an intersubjectivity that allows them and demands them (brutality).[6] We begin, however, by revisiting the violence of narco-culture that we have alluded to in the previous chapters.

THE VIOLENCE OF NARCO-CULTURE

For the sake of highlighting the distinctions I wish to make, I situate my reflections within the scope of the cultural phenomenon that I have described as narco-culture (chapter 1), in which the rules and mythologies that determine it as *culture* promote excessive violence and the necessary repetition and reproduction of the objectification of persons. In thinking about narco-culture as a space for the possibility of excessive violence, we are forced to reconsider our notions of violence itself (chapter 2) and personhood (chapter 4). That is, narco-culture challenges our thinking by revealing modalities of violence, culture, and persons that are not only extreme but possible within the rational space of the human.

5. Kryt, "Mexico's War Is Hell."

6. A note on the potential relativism of these fragments: the distinctions made here are not situated to the extent that they cannot be applied to other violent cultures and other moral emergencies. Ultimately, I will claim that the logic of brutality takes on the semblance of an ontological permanence where the repetitiveness of the other's death becomes spectacle and, in becoming spectacle, becomes familiar and unsurprising—it becomes just another happening in our world.

In a 2008 interview with celebrated Mexican journalist Julio Scherer García, the then convicted and imprisoned narco-trafficker Sandra Ávila Beltrán, also known as La Reina del Pacífico (Queen of the Pacific), gives a firsthand account of the nature of this culture, which she calls "narco society":

> Narco society is hard, cruel, and in its own space, it is a society onto itself. There is no code that overrides power. Neither are there laws that can resolve disputes and there is no authority that can impose itself on the chaos that comes and goes, always present, always making itself known.[7]

This passage is telling for a number of reasons but particularly because it perfectly sums up what we could hastily call the essential characteristics of narco-culture, or "narco society"—namely, that it is a "society onto itself," which means that it is not a subculture or a marginal, fringe culture but, as we would say of any independent or nonderivative thing, a *thing in itself* (see chapter 1). Moreover, while it lacks official codes, laws, or authority that can override power and set things in order, it has a *form*—namely, the "chaos" that is "always making itself known." Thus chaos in this sense is an ordered chaos, an *apparent* chaos that is permanent ("always present"). This chaos as form, or what I call in chapter 1 regulae, makes itself known by giving itself as the expectation of this form of life, of this narco-society. What seems like chaos—for instance, corpses piled in front of ordinary homes, limbless bodies hanging from bridges, the spectacle of mass executions, and countless other acts of incomprehensible human destruction broadcast through various media—is in reality a way of life, a normal course of events, the rational unfolding of everyday life (what Ávila Beltrán calls the "chaos that comes and goes").

The rational unfolding of everyday life is, then, as a rule, violent—a violence that is seen and told but, at times, unimaginable and thus unspeakable. Take, for instance, the month of September 2018: in thirty days, 1,456 murders related to narco-violence were reported throughout

7. Scherer García, *La Reina del Pacífico*, p. 99.

Mexico.[8] This excess of death clearly challenges our modern conception of the acceptable death count of a civilized society. There seems to be a limit to the death that we may accept, but no more! The illegal economy (involving the trafficking, sale, and production of narcotics as well as the economic exchanges that make corruption, assassinations, and kidnappings possible) of narco-culture emerges as the *reason* for the violence, but the *excesses* of violence and death and the obvious violations of personal life and liberty demand a more accurate description. Again, it is not enough to say that narco-society is violent, so new terms are sought. One journalist called it "Terror! The word for what is happening in Sinaloa is terror."[9] We ask, Is *terror* the appropriate term? Does it capture the relevant experience? Prima facie, it seems that when excessive violence is normalized, when it becomes familiar, then *terror* no longer applies; people are not terrified, paralyzed, or surprised by the violence that "comes and goes" (I will return to terror in chapter 4). Our term is thus *brutality*, which refers to the manifestation of that type of chaos that crosses clearly defined moral and existential boundaries—to that type of chaos that is more than chaos, to that violence that is *more than violence* but achieves a certain normality. This is a violence that *one is used to*—a certain ontological state of being—or, as Jeremy Kryt writes, that refers to a "dog-eat-dog mentality" that nonetheless becomes "part of the culture."[10]

In order to draw out the brutality of narco-culture, consider the example of decapitation: beheadings are a normal occurrence in jihadist culture, and they serve a purpose—namely, to terrorize the public and offend our Western sensibilities. We say they are brutal, that the perpetrators are cruel and lack basic human decency. However, despite the depravity of the terrorists' act, there is a specific rationality to it: it is an act of war or an act that, while gruesome and appalling to our moral

8. Hernandez and Lopez, "Septiembre." Compare the first six months of 2017, when 764 murders had been reported in the state of Sinaloa alone. See Arce, "War for Sinaloa."
9. In Arce, "War for Sinaloa."
10. Kryt, "Mexico's War Is Hell."

sense, serves *some* utilitarian purpose.[11] We *see* excessive violence, but it seems internal to and justified within a more intentional political spectacle. Outside of this delineated political spectacle, the *excess* of such an act really stands out; that is, outside the terrorist context, the excess of the violent act lacks all intelligibility. As another example, a national news story may tell us of a man who after murdering his mother and cutting off her head is subsequently arrested walking down the highway in possession of said head. We may be asked to imagine the violence *and the brutality* that constituted the crime. The nation dwells on those events for weeks; they are dissected and reproduced in a media spectacle that considers it a glimpse into the pathology of an exceptional case. Here again, the brutality is evident, but it is immediately denied in a process where the act is rationalized as a mark of a deranged mind. The brutality apparent in these two cases, that is, can be easily explained away by an appeal to either utilitarian or psychological factors.

While decapitations had been, as Ioan Grillo reports, "almost unheard of in modern Mexico,"[12] today they are common in narco-culture. Bodiless heads are rolled into a disco to announce the arrival of a new cartel; the head of a man is placed next to a narco-manta (a banner displaying a warning or a message to the public or government officials) to indicate its seriousness; men and women are decapitated on videos uploaded to the internet as a message to other narcos that *these* criminals are more ruthless; narco-corridos tell us that a head in a box sends a clearer message than an email. A popular narco-corrido begins,

> *Cut his head clean off, don't mistreat it*
> *I'm sending it to those that ordered*
> *my robbery and my death;*
> *Put it in a cooler and put a note on it that says: try it again.*

11. The rationality of terrorism is inscribed in its definition, which tells us that it is the "intentional use or threat to use violence against civilians and non-combatants by a non-state actor in an asymmetrical confrontation, in order to achieve political ends." In Stepanova, *Terrorism*, p. 11.
12. As Grillo notes, "Decapitation was almost unheard of in modern Mexico. But in April 2006, the craniums of two Acapulco policemen were dumped by the town hall. . . . It is still unclear exactly what inspired such brutality" (*El Narco*, p. 106).

Cortenlen bien la cabeza, que no se maltrate
La voy a mandar, aquellos que le ordenaron
Que me diera piso, y me fuera a robar
Ponganle en una hielera y escribanle afuera vuelvanlo a intentar.

—Los Cuates de Sinaloa, "El mercenario"

This song and others like it capture something essential about attitudes toward decapitations in narco-culture—namely, that cutting off a human head (or having someone else do it) is the ultimate expression of power over human life and, likewise, of power of *and* control over death, since dictating how someone is killed is, as we know, usually left in the hands of the state, nature, or God. While the jihadist penchant for beheadings may offend all politics, the act nonetheless carries a grandiose political message, a sense of mission, and a vision that unifies in Franz Fanon's sense; the message sent by a head in a cooler, on the other hand, lacks that grandiosity, and its aim is usually local, setting limits and reinforcing the *rules* of the form of life, which as rules need not be just or fair but nonetheless obeyed. The rule at play here could easily be ripped from the Machiavellian playbook: "If an injury has to be done to a man it should be so severe that one does not fear revenge for it."[13] This rule is essential to the narco form of life: if violence is necessary, it must be *severe* (i.e., brutal).

This unspoken mandate explains the violent excesses of narco-culture. Severity is required in instances and situations that are predetermined as necessarily demanding it—revenge, spectacle, self-defense, competition, grandstanding, disrespect, disloyalty, and so on. Moreover, while severity for Machiavelli might have meant making sure that the person is dead or incapable of exacting revenge, in narco-culture, severity means always going beyond what is required for this purpose. There is a severity that we are willing to accept; there is a limit to the violence we will encode in our rules. And we know when this limit has been surpassed. And this limit stops at *death*. The language of our immediate reactions to narco-violence speaks these limits: "This is not human!" "Why didn't they just

13. Machiavelli, *Prince*, p. 10.

shoot him?" "They didn't have to do *that* to her!" "Why disembowel a person like that?" "Wasn't killing him enough?"

In the background to our reactions to a hyperviolent death is the implicit belief (or a priori consensus) that murder *is* acceptable among us but that there is a limit to the violence—one that must be observed in the act of bringing about someone's death. Thus we protest when this limit is exceeded. However, what does it mean when these reactions, or protestations, fall silent? It means one of two things: on the one hand, that extra- or hyper- or excessively violent acts leave us speechless, that in their excess and severity they have become unsayable; and on the other, that acts such as these have become routine. In other words, they have achieved a degree of normalcy within the intersubjective realm, they have become norms in this form of life, they have become cultural rules. This points to the distinguishing feature of acts like decapitations in the context of narco-culture—namely, that they become unspectacular in the process of their repetition. This kind of *excessive*, *inexpressible*, yet *routine* violence—what I will also refer to as a *surplus* of violence—is brutality, and its complex structure infects entire cultural contexts so that acts like decapitation, the execution of children, the disintegration of human bodies in vats of acid, or even cannibalism[14] assume the form of that chaos that comes and goes. These cultural contexts ultimately become spaces where brutality becomes an ontologically determining aspect of cultural life.[15]

Thus in defining brutality as an excess or *surplus of violence*—namely, referring to those behaviors or those events that exceed an acceptable or expected experience of violence—what I mean is that while the murder of a man in his home is already a violent act, the execution of the rest of his family for no other reason than to punish the already murdered man is *more than* and *other to* violence; these are extra happenings that urge our rational consciousness to ask paradoxical questions about the limits of violence or the acceptability of death. The surplus is expressed in those

14. "Los Zetas comen carne humana."

15. *Ontological commitment* is used in the sense indicated by Barry Smith when he says that "the ontological commitment of a theory (or individual or culture) consists in the objects or types of objects the theory (or individual or culture) assumes to exist" ("Ontology," p. 166). In this sense, brutality is assumed to *be a manner of existence*.

adjectives added to violence, such as *unthinkable*, *irrepressible*, *unnecessary*, or *homicidal*.[16] Again, the concept of violence simply does not capture the fullness and reality of this *plus*—it is a *plus of violence* that is simultaneously *other* than violence and *beyond* it.

MORE THAN VIOLENCE

> You learn a lot of forms of torture. To a point you enjoy carrying them out. We laughed at people's pain—at the way we tortured them. There are many forms of torture. Cutting off arms, decapitating. This is a very strong thing. You decapitate someone and have no feeling, no fear.
>
> —Anonymous *sicario* in Ioan Grillo, *El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency*

> The bullet-riddled bodies of the Martinez children were found on a bloody floor, huddled next to the corpses of their parents in a rented shack. The family of six was massacred, authorities believe, because the Zetas cartel suspected the father, an unemployed taxi driver, had played some part in a rival gang's attack that killed a Zeta gunman. The response underlines the no-holds-barred tactics of drug gangs that are splintering and battling one another for control in much of Mexico, which recently recorded its highest monthly murder total in at least 20 years.
>
> —AP News, July 10, 2017

The acts and attitude described by the *sicario* (narco-assassin) or the event of a family's murder reported by the Associated Press could be described as violent. We notice, however, that both descriptions—cutting off arms while feeling no sympathy for the suffering of another and shooting an entire family over violating some unwritten cartel rule, respectively—point to an excess or a surplus in which simply calling those acts violent will

16. Luis Astorga, in noting the prevalence of violence anywhere where drug culture is found, makes the following observation: "But in none of those countries already mentioned have the narco-traffickers exercised such homicidal violence as they have in Mexico in the last few years in their struggle to achieve their objectives." Astorga, *Drogas sin fronteras*, p. v.

not suffice. We want to say more: the *sicario* might want to say that his acts are *very* violent, the Associated Press might want to say that this sort of assassination is *too much*, and we might want to say that for us, it is unimaginable. *Violence*, that is, fails to satisfy the actuality of the given reality. This again means that violence and brutality are not identical. It might be the case that wherever there is brutality, there is violence, but it is not the case that wherever there is violence, there is brutality. As we said before (chapter 2), violence is *everywhere* and can be said of practically any state of affairs where force is exerted. Brutality appears together and after violence as its *excess*—as a *surplus* of violence that disrupts both the state of affairs and our concept of violence.

However, there is yet another distinction that must be made. It is brought to mind by the *sicario* and the Associated Press quotes above. The first points to those characteristics that reference the psychological makeup of those who have assumed the *habit* of the narco form of life; the second, although indirectly, points to the culture itself, to the routine and the excess of it all. The first points to cruelty, to the *temperament of a subject* who *enjoys carrying out* the violent act, who *laughs* at people's pain; the second to the *conditions of intersubjectivity* where violent excess is a tactic or a rule, manifested here as the indiscriminate killing of an entire family for no other reason than the suspicion of complicity in a betrayal.

We may think that cruelty and brutality are identical to one another. After all, we routinely confuse the terms in ordinary speech—for instance, when we complain that we live in a "cruel" world or when we applaud the "brutally honest" comedian. In theoretical discussions, cruelty is thought to be an encompassing set and brutality one of its members. Thus Randall Collins, in an excellent sociological treatment of the matter, refers to "overt brutality" as a "dimension" of "human cruelty" and as "cruelty without passion."[17] What I want to propose, however, is that cruelty *without passion* is not cruelty but brutality; that is, cruelty is *essentially* related to subjective passion so that cruelty without this relation is not cruelty but something else—namely, brutality. Brutality, as an allowance of intersubjectivity, is not related to subjective passion and is thus itself not a dimension of cruelty but its own thing; it is *essentially* different.

17. Collins, "Three Faces of Cruelty," p. 419.

Max Scheler and the Phenomenological Difference

The essential difference between cruelty and brutality is laid out by German philosopher Max Scheler in *The Nature of Sympathy* (1913), where both cruelty and brutality are thought to be deficient (and destructive) forms of being-in-community with others. However, whereas the former possesses a psychological dimension, the latter lacks it; in other words, while cruelty shares in the intentionality of desire and pleasure, brutality does not. It is what brutality lacks in relation to cruelty that shows it as the sublation of the concept of violence, that determines it as *other* to and *more* than violence.

What Scheler calls *Mitgefühl*, translated as "fellow feeling" or "feeling *with* others," underscores his theory of social cohesion, whereby persons relate to one another, live with one another, and construct historical intersubjective relations (such as culture) with one another based on the capacity to "enter into sympathy" with others.[18] This *entering into sympathy*, or the individual's "ability to feel another's feeling state vicariously,"[19] is a complex intentional act, requiring a movement of the will and an effort to participate in the other's suffering. As Scheler puts it, fellow feeling "involves *intentional reference* . . . to the other person's experience," requiring an "actual 'participation' . . . in the very phenomenon as a *re-action* to the state and value of the other's feelings."[20] "Re-action" to the other's feelings manifests itself in sympathetic acts of *caring-for* the other—in coming to the other's aid, in a *response-ability* for the other. Scheler calls cultural modalities where members interact with one another in ways that express such re-actions "life-communities."[21] These are sites of togetherness, or "living-with," and are natural societal formations growing out of that need to live-with and in the presence of other individuals ("life-communities are opposed to 'the mass' and are not quite 'society'"[22]). They are natural, furthermore, because, unlike society as such, they are not artificially constructed through contracts or some predetermined political

18. Frings, *Mind of Max Scheler*, p. 92.
19. Barber, *Guardian of Dialogue*, p. 116.
20. Scheler, *Nature of Sympathy*, pp. 13–14.
21. See Frings, *Mind of Max Scheler*, p. 101.
22. In Frings, pp. 101–20.

objectives.[23] Narco-culture, as a generic outgrowth of multiple economic, social, aesthetic, political, and biopolitical relations, could be thought of as one such life-community.

Life-communities, as complex sites of participatory living-with and living-among others, are also multilayered sites of vows, oaths, promises, and agreements—intentional and unintentional—and, as such, are spaces of disagreements, betrayals, power struggles, and violence. In other words, life-communities are sites of the life-and-death struggle. In life-communities, individuals vicariously participate in feelings of joy and grief with those with whom they live among or with. Yet just as they can share in the grief of mourning, they can likewise participate in that mourning by bringing it about; they can kill and erase the other with whom they live. Those who live with us or among us, that is, can be the opposite of friends, the opposite of caring fellow humans; they can act, Scheler tells us, in ways "*opposite* of an act of fellow-feeling."[24] As such, cruelty and brutality are possibilities of being-with and phenomenologically opposite to the phenomena of caring and loving; they are opposite to acts of being-with others in sympathy. However, as with Aquinas, Scheler is sure to insist that cruelty and brutality are neither identical nor related as set and subset to each other. About cruelty, Scheler writes,

> The *cruel* man owes his awareness of the pain or sorrow he causes entirely to a capacity for visualizing feeling! His joy lies in "torturing" and in the agony of his victim. As he feels, vicariously, the increasing pain or suffering of his victim, so his own primary pleasure and enjoyment at the other's pain also increases. Cruelty consists not at all in the cruel man's being simply "insensitive" to other people's suffering. . . . It is chiefly found in pathological cases . . . where it arises as a result of the patient's exclusive preoccupation in his own feelings, which altogether prevents him from giving emotional acceptance to the experience of other people.[25]

23. Frings, p. 114.
24. Scheler, *Nature of Sympathy*, p. 132.
25. Scheler, p. 14.

About brutality, he says,

> In contrast to cruelty, "brutality" is merely a disregard of the other people's experience, despite the apprehension of it in feeling. Thus, to regard a human being as a mere log of wood and to treat the object accordingly, is not to be "brutal" towards him. On the other hand, it is characteristic of brutality that, given merely a sense of life, undifferentiated, as yet, into separate experiences, given even the fact of an enhanced appearance of life or a tendency towards it, any violent interruption of this tendency . . . is enough to mark it as brutal.[26]

The obvious difference between the first and the second quote rests on the fact that while both cruelty and brutality depend on a *sensitivity, awareness, or consciousness* of the suffering of another, or "feeling it in vicarious feeling,"[27] in cruelty, there is a *taking pleasure* in that suffering, while in brutality, that taking pleasure in the suffering of another is missing, as it involves a *disregarding* of pleasure altogether—that is, *there is no pleasure in brutality*. A less obvious difference is that while cruelty is a *selfish* or subjective attitude toward suffering, brutality can be conceived as a *selfless* or detached (objective) attitude toward it. (Notice that, unlike Aquinas, Scheler does not relegate brutality to the realm of beasts.)

It is this less obvious difference that we should attend to, since in it lies the moral, or philosophical, reasons for making such distinctions. Along with Aquinas (and later Balibar), Scheler firmly locates cruelty within the subjective realm of the intentional subject—that is, cruelty is internal to subjective dispositions and intentionally directed toward the suffering of others. Brutality, on the other hand, is much more nuanced and complex. It disregards pleasure, thus lacking the intentional directedness to the other's suffering; it loses itself when its object *ceases* to be a person. That is, when the other ceases to be a person, it is no longer brutality, Scheler tells us, because the person is not a person but an object; it becomes itself again at the very hint of the other's humanity. Thus brutality reappears when the other reclaims her humanity from the objectifying gaze of the other.

26. Scheler, p. 14.
27. Barber, *Guardian of Dialogue*, p. 116.

We capture this dialectical movement indicative of brutality in observations like the following from the *Washington Post*: "The killing [of] children [is meant to] terrorize the population or prove to rivals that [one cartel's] savagery is boundless."[28] In the case of children being used either to terrorize or to communicate a point, children are inserted into the machinery of terror as disposable yet useful object-bodies (first dialectical moment: they are objectified, and brutality vanishes into the boundlessness of savagery). However, their death has meaning, it carries a message, and it *proves* the point that savagery knows no limits. For this, a trace of humanity must remain: the children (second dialectical moment: brutality reappears). This brings us to the third (synthesizing) dialectical moment—namely, that through a repetition of the first two, brutality becomes normalized; that is, the killing of children to showcase savagery (i.e., brutality) becomes routinized into the culture as something that happens and something that should be expected as a means to communicate a message (third dialectical moment: brutality becomes an aspect of *the form of life*).

All of this points to the selflessness of brutality, to its essential detachment from subjective desires (the "disregard of the other people's experience"), although it is the subject that necessarily carries out the brutal act. This being and not-being of brutality, its appearance and disappearance, which depends on the state of the person as either objective or human, is part and parcel of the logic of brutality, and it reveals the processes under which personhood loses its ontological privilege before the omnipresent threat of an excessive violence that codifies itself in culture. Before looking at this *logic* a bit closer, it is important to disentangle brutality from cruelty, and for this, we turn to Étienne Balibar.

Étienne Balibar on Cruelty

Contemporary political philosophy stops short of making Scheler's distinction, opting instead to place the weight, or the surplus, of excessive violence on cruelty. For instance, Étienne Balibar's *Politics and the Other Scene* makes an effort to engage the insufficiencies of the concept of violence after recognizing that "there are layers of violence . . . [such

28. See O'Connor and Booth, "Mexican Cartels."

as] the most 'excessive,' the most 'self-destructive' part of violence . . . that eludes the logic of power and counter-power."[29] The insufficiency of violence has to do mainly with its abstractness or ideality, aspects of the concept that cannot capture a demonstration or, as I have been pointing out, that cannot capture the *reality* of excessive violence. If both *violence* and *power* fail to capture this demonstration, then, Balibar says, "we need a new term . . . *cruelty*."[30] According to Balibar, *cruelty* captures the demonstrations of excessive violence, which are usually "something else," and "*another* reality, like the emergence or glimpse of another scene."[31] Referring to cruelty as "another reality" or "another scene" points to the ungraspability of that *surplus* of violence that we find in demonstrations of narco-violence and to which I think brutality is better suited.

While Balibar recognizes that a new term is needed, *cruelty* is not it, especially if we take into consideration Scheler's definition above. Balibar's own definition of cruelty seeks to ask too much of the concept:

> "Cruelty" . . . indicate[s] those forms of extreme violence, either intentional or systematic, physical or moral—although such distinctions become questionable precisely when we cross the lines of extremity—that, so to speak, appear to us to be "worse than death."[32]

In Balibar's analysis, the concept of cruelty tries to capture the excesses of which we speak, which he considers "worse than death," and that are perpetrated by subjects (intentional) or systems and *demonstrated* in both physical and moral ways. Thus "the internal exclusion of the poor in our societies" and "'ethnic' and 'religious' wars" are a form of systematic *and* intentional cruelty, as they are orchestrated by those in power and deployed worldwide.[33] However, Balibar, like Scheler, finds in cruelty that aspect that Scheler finds essential to it—namely, that cruelty involves a "taking pleasure in the suffering of others"; Balibar says that cruelty "has

29. Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, p. 135.
30. Balibar, p. 136.
31. Balibar, p. 136.
32. Balibar, "Outlines of a Topography of Cruelty," p. 15.
33. Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, pp. 141–43.

to derive from itself . . . *jouissance* ('enjoyment')."[34] This would mean that "systematic" cruelty derives pleasure or enjoyment from the suffering of others. However, if, for example, the marginalization of the poor and ethnic genocide are thought to be systematic demonstrations of an absolute disregard for the experiences of the suffering of others, as Scheler says of brutality, then the pleasure aspect (jouissance) is missing, and we cannot call those acts cruel; we must call them brutal. That which is worse than death, I insist, is brutality.

Let us pause at Balibar's definition for a moment and say more about how cruelty is not the concept we are after. If cruelty, as Balibar suggests, captures this layer of extreme violence that would otherwise have no name, then these excessive demonstrations would all involve some aspect of *taking pleasure in the suffering of others*. However, they do not. The systems and intersubjective arrangements that violate others in Balibar's scheme, according to Slavoj Žižek's reading of the same, deploy "excessive" and "non-functional" violence that is "grounded in no utilitarian or ideological reasons."[35] On this reading, mistreating the poor and killing others of different religious faiths are cruel—that is, when done "blindly" and not for the sake of ulterior political or moral motives. This would mean that according to Balibar, society's instruments of control, whether *real* or *virtual*, in "cross[ing] the lines of extremity" and bringing about demonstrations that appear to be "worse than death" neither take pleasure in the pain that they inflict nor derive jouissance from this pain, since they lack the intentionality of enjoyment that would otherwise be attached to *fulfilling* utilitarian or ideological motives.

Although I agree with Balibar's underlying insights here—namely, that "extreme violence" is "another scene," that it is not violence in itself but *something else*, and that cruelty can be objectivized, or transformed into something systematic or assimilated into the social structure—my position is that calling it cruelty falls short. This is because doing so makes it seem that the extreme violence is still somehow subjective or for the benefit of subjective enjoyment—or, to put it another way, that the material conditions giving rise to this kind of violence somehow *enjoy*

34. Balibar, pp. 136–37.
35. Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 864.

the suffering they inflict or, more specifically, that the neoliberal economic system that underlies the narco-economy takes pleasure in the dismemberment or defiling of human bodies. I do not think such systematic pleasure is real or possible.

Balibar touches upon this difficulty. He says of cruelty that "there is nothing like a *centre*—not even a decentered centre, in cruelty,"[36] which points to what I am calling the ungraspability of the *plus of violence*. To capture this decentering complexity of cruelty, Balibar makes a distinction that Max Scheler makes unnecessary in his own distinction between cruelty and brutality. Balibar distinguishes between *subjective* and *objective* cruelty. On the one hand, subjective cruelty is that form of violence that is intentionally directed at *known* others, what he calls "*ultra-subjective* forms of violence, or *cruelty with a Medusa face*."[37] Objective cruelty, on the other hand, is that form of violence that is ignorant and blind to that sort of knowledge and is, in one way or another, codified. This is "what I would be tempted to call an *ultra-objective* form of violence, or *cruelty without a face*"[38]—what Randall Collins above calls "cruelty without passion."[39]

As indicated previously, Scheler, whose distinction I agree with and apply throughout, calls Balibar's "cruelty without a face" *brutality* and "cruelty with a Medusa face" *cruelty*. Scheler's reason for distinguishing these is precisely because cruelty is always subjective, so talking about an "ultra-objective" cruelty does not make much sense. Despite its shortcomings, Balibar's distinction points to something that is beyond reproach: the phenomenon of what he calls "codified violence,"[40] to which "ultra-objective" violence refers or from which it results. Once violence is codified, faces disappear and bodies become objects *for* violation, exploitation, and death.

Thus while I agree with Balibar that extreme violence has been codified into social reality, the focus on cruelty (as either objective or subjective) forgets that the kind of extreme, excessive, and unspeakable violence that he aims to name is usually not subjective, not intentional, and not meant

36. Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, p. 137.
37. Balibar, p. 143.
38. Balibar, p. 143.
39. Collins, "Three Faces of Cruelty," p. 419.
40. Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, p. 138.

to provoke *pleasure* in the suffering of others, even if cruelty does permeate entire cultures in extraordinary ways. The cruelty of individuals is undeniable. There is cruelty, and there is enjoyment in the suffering of others. On one hand, we could say, with Žižek, that modern cultures propose the injunction to "enjoy" for the sake of the capitalist economy itself and that in narco-culture, this injunction refers to the enjoyment of violence and suffering.[41] On the other hand, the Machiavellian rule that demands severity overrides such injunctions. The demand for severity is *internal to* the cultural regulae; it is objective, and individual cruelty merely fulfills the demands of brutality. The cold-blooded killing of an infant next to his murdered mother, the gutting of a suspected informant, the lynching of headless corpses over bridges—all for the sake of *sending a message*—are a result of a violence that is codified into the very workings of culture. They are not merely cruel acts carried out by a deranged mind or a pleasure-seeking culture; they are more than that. These acts are brutal, and they are meant to be brutal, and they are meant to be brutal by the cultural codifications themselves.

How is the codification of brutality possible? Let us consider this question next.

The Logic of Denial

Scheler's distinction forces us to reserve the designation *cruel* to individual persons—that is, to individuals who enjoy torturing and enjoy the pain they cause in others. This points to an inaccuracy in designating systems, societies, weather patterns, and so on as cruel, since that assumes that these things can enjoy or take pleasure in the pain of others. That is, we cannot say of situations or things that they are cruel. "Traffic was cruel this morning" is an inaccurate characterization, since there is no traffic taking pleasure in our rush-hour suffering; the same goes for when we say "The heat is cruel today." In this expression, the sun's cruelty is a misnomer. One can conclude from this that we cannot say that groups of people, collectives, societies, or cultures are cruel. Cruelty points to the individual behavior of persons in a culture but not to the culture itself, which through its rules and social sanctions may demand cruelty but

41. See Žižek, *First as Tragedy*.

takes no pleasure in it; cultures in this characterization can only be brutal but not cruel.

Thinking of narco-culture helps us make sense of this. Narco-culture is a culture that prioritizes its economic goals before all others; behind its advertised excesses, it is a complex and multifaceted business culture, and what it demands, it demands of all who *inhabit* it. While there are personalities that stand out in their cruelty (famous characters like M1 or El Chapo), their particular subjective desires are secondary to the objective goals of the culture. The cruelty of these particular personalities, that is, responds and obeys a brutal cultural imperative that is greater than they are themselves. We can say that the brutality of narco-culture is foundational to and demanding of the cruelty of those who make it up. Žižek makes a similar point about contemporary capitalism's injunction for people to "enjoy" as much as they possibly can:

> The superego imperative to enjoy thus functions as the reversal of Kant's "you can because you must!"; it relies on a "you must because you can!" That is to say, the super ego aspects of today's "non-repressive" hedonism (the constant provocation we are exposed to, enjoining us to go right to the end and explore all modes of *jouissance*) resides in the way permitted jouissance turns into obligatory *jouissance*.[42]

This notion of "obligatory" enjoyment is similar to the obligatory cruelty of a brutal culture that I am considering here. Narco-culture proposes the injunction to be ever more severe, to be as excessive as possible in all things, including and especially violence. Said differently, the intersubjective collective or life community can arrange itself so as to be produced by and to produce values that allow or promote a negation of personhood through means that are both excessive and indifferent to subjective interests. Moreover, while the subjects that make up the intersubjective relations can be cruel, their cruelty folds itself or disappears into the brutality of the cultural environment, in which case we talk about a person being the victim of brutal circumstances rather than the victim

42. Žižek, p. 58.

of a cruel murderer. In this scheme, brutality seems to be *outside* the scope of subjective desire and in the realm of intersubjective labor—a strategy of negotiation tied to the world and the objective circumstances that demand such excesses, which is perhaps why Balibar calls this type of excessive violence (wrongly, I argue) "*objective* cruelty."[43]

This brings us to the question posed at the end of the previous section, which asked how brutality becomes codified or normalized in the cultural realm. Differently put, we ask how brutality becomes objective and determining of both culture and subjectivity. It achieves this through what I call a logic of denial that is characterized by a dialectic constituted by the following moments (a dialectic I allude to previously and whose form I treat in the next section): the denial of suffering, the denial of the sufferer who is lost into the objective world as a thing among things, and the denial of brutality itself. As we saw with Scheler's definition, if the sufferer is seen as merely a thing among things, then brutality disappears along with the sufferer and her suffering. The brutality of a culture will thus seek to negate itself, a move that requires the dehumanization (or derealization) of others; it requires stripping others of their humanity so that they become objects, "logs of wood." Scheler adds, "If you suppose a man to be a corpse or a tree-stump it is just not *possible* for you to be 'brutal' towards him."[44] Thus in order for brutality to become ritualized in a culture, others must be *transformed* in an act of negation (a transformation suggested by the phrase "If you suppose . . .") into lifeless corpses or object-things. This is the negative logic of brutality.

The negative logic of brutality, which is a logic of denial, seeks to convince those within a particular cultural context or life-community that what they experience is, in fact, not brutality—that the everyday reality of excessive violence is normal. Here we arrive at a crucial point: cultural modalities exist in which the objectification of others has become routine, where the suffering and the brutality that destroy persons are accepted as mundane. The normalization of brutality thus initiates the process of transforming persons into killable bodies, a reification in which *one cannot*

43. Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, p. 143 (my emphasis).
44. Scheler, *Nature of Sympathy*, p. 133.

be brutal because persons are not persons but things. Institutionalized in this way, brutality seems to gradually disappear in its denials.

However, despite its logic of denial and its gradual fading into the background, the brutality of a culture can nonetheless be felt or experienced. We experience it as the violent objectification of persons as nonhuman and disposable things, an experience that overwhelms our concepts and challenges the limits of the acceptable or the familiar. We resort to calling "unimaginable" those realities that expose these limits. For example, while a punishment that might seem excessive in relation to a particular crime might be considered to be merely cruel (in Aquinas's or Balibar's definition), murdering and then eating someone goes beyond cruelty, beyond violence, and enters the realm of brutality. This notion of brutality should help us make sense of otherwise shocking reports such as the following:

> A horrific initiation ritual belonging to the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) was revealed after 12 members of the organization were detained for multiple homicide. . . . According to information provided by the Authorities in the State of Tabasco ("Fiscalía de Tabasco"), two of the men arrested were minors who were made to eat human flesh in order to join the cartel. . . . Authorities added that the practice of cannibalism has the purpose of forming more blood-thirsty, "cold-blooded," and aggressive assassins.[45]

Only in the sense in which brutality has infiltrated the very social ontology of a particular culture can the ritual of cannibalism reported here not be taken to be, especially by the perpetrators, *morally problematic*. In fact, it is normalized as a practice of belonging to the culture. Here the corpse is not human but equivalent to a consumable object, and *what* the aspiring *sicarios* eat is not a person but an object-corpse, a sacrifice to the narco form of life. In this example, the logic of denial achieves its greatest transparency.

45. "Sicarios caníbales."

The Brutality Paradox

> You see dead bodies and you feel nothing. There is killing every day. Some days there are ten executions, other days there are thirty. It is just normal now.
>
> —Sinaloa Cartel foot solider in Ioan Grillo, *El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency*

"It is just normal now": this phrase points to the establishment of brutality as a form of life. In denying itself, as transparent as that may seem to us, brutality becomes the rule. In this process of denial, brutality sets up what I call the "brutality paradox." The paradox looks like this:

- For an act to be brutal, it must be an act against another person.
- Brutality objectifies the other, which means that the person disappears behind her objectification.
- When the person disappears behind her objectification, the harm done against her is no longer against a person but against an object, so it is no longer brutality.
- Therefore, in contexts of rampant objectification, we cannot speak of brutality against persons.

The brutality paradox normalizes itself in cultures in which extreme violence, death, and dehumanization persist. Its paradoxical nature, in challenging reason and understanding, allows it to be beyond the rational, or to *not* be thought of as irrational. As such, it enters the cultural imaginary as *rule* or norm, becoming *part of* the culture and a condition of cultural life that shapes, forms, and constitutes cultural identity in turn.

Thus while the subjects can indeed be brutal (just as they can indeed be cruel), their brutality reflects their cultural context more than their mere psychology (which, as we said above, answers the injunctions of the context). Again, brutality is *external* to the desires or passions of the subject. The perpetuation and repetition of this externalization are easy to see in those forms of life where brutality "is just normal now." Every murder, every decapitation, every dismemberment becomes, as narco-journalists point out, part of an endless killing (*matanza sin fin*) where

"persons kill and persons die because nothing happens and no one reacts when someone kills or when someone dies."[46]

To put the matter more philosophically, cultural contexts in which the brutal disintegration of another human being no longer surprises are cultural contexts in which that erasure of life is always already justified within a space of reasons that objectifies and produces bodies to be killed—sacrificial bodies ready-made to die for the sake of cultural rules or imperatives. Such is narco-culture. The objectification of persons into *disposable and undifferentiated* bodies-for-death takes place here. Moreover, it precludes moral blame from befalling the murderer or the culture, since, as Scheler tells us, so long as the victim is not human, brutality does not appear. This is why the brutal person may deny his brutality and, in turn, his guilt: he may say that what was disemboweled or decapitated was never a person but an enemy, a *contra*, a threat, a *means to a greater economic end*, thus justifying the brutal act within that specific cultural space of reasons.

Such justifications are permissible when the objectifications of brutality have taken hold—when what Judith Butler calls "the derealization of the Other" has become commonplace.[47] This *derealization*—or the turning of others into ideals, classes, statistics, members of sets, and so on while stripping them of reality—is a function of the objectifications and its repetitions of a type of violence that has transcended its own limits; that is, of brutality that animates itself in repetitive negations and innumerable dehumanizations. Brutality *derealizes* through its force and logic.

Butler herself struggles to name this kind of violence that derealizes, but we can see that the force that negates lives is the same that lends the other its nonhuman, spectral existence—and this force is brutality (I will return to Butler in the next chapter). Thus as a self-repeating derealization of others, brutality reproduces itself into a routine and, in this process, becomes more mechanical and industrialized; it is just another aspect of narco-culture. This leads outside observers, such as Ioan Grillo, to publicly confess, in a *New York Times* column covering the discovery of

46. Hope, "La matanza de nunca acabar."
47. Butler, *Precarious Life*, pp. 33–34. I will return to Butler's idea of derealization in the following chapter.

a number of mass narco-graves, that he is "dumbstruck by the extent to which normal life seems to carry on next door to such terrors."[48]

The Heroism Paradox: An Illustration

In order to draw attention to the operative dimensions of this normalization, it helps to consider another paradox, the paradox of heroism, which shows up in the case of antinarco vigilantes in Southwestern Mexico.

In his excellent documentary *Cartel Land* (2015), director Matthew Heineman tackles the moral depravity of narco-culture by focusing on those who oppose it. While the documentary follows anticartel militias in both the US (Arizona) and Mexico (Michoacán), it is in his study of the *autodefensas* (self-defense groups) in Michoacán that we get a glimpse into the extent to which brutality has been routinized in its entrance into the cultural landscape. In the film, Heineman documents the rise and eventual fall of the *autodefensas*, who proclaim themselves to be an armed resistance movement against narco-brutality. (As an example, they justify their cause with the event of the murder of fifteen people at a lemon processing plant brought about by a failed extortion attempt. Included in the rampage was the brutal killing of a three-month-old baby who was held upside-down by his right leg and struck on the head with a rock until dead.) The movement is led by a mild-mannered pediatrician, Dr. José Manuel Mireles Verlverde, who proclaims early on that his group has chosen the only alternative available to them given the brutality and lawlessness to which they are subjected on an everyday basis—namely, they have chosen more brutality and more lawlessness. With pride and sincerity, he tells Heineman that "we have chosen our own manner of death."

One by one, the *autodefensas* retake towns and municipalities from the cartels. Heineman captures the elevation of Dr. Mireles to the status of liberator, of hero. Towns in which kidnappings, executions, extortion, and murders were everyday occurrences welcome Mireles, who with an ever-growing army pursues cartel assassins without restraint. We witness here liberation through brutality—a brutality, moreover, that is so commonplace that it is confused with justice. Midway through the film,

48. Grillo, "Paradox of Mexico's Mass Graves."

we, the viewers, witness the extent to which the loosest notion of retributive justice is subsumed by the logic of brutality.

A cartel member has been captured, and one of Dr. Mireles's men comes to ask for instructions. Mireles tells his men, "These guys get captured by the federal police and immediately get released, weapons and all. Twenty-four hours later, the gunfights and the massacres begin again. Now, who got this guy?"[49] His man emerges from the dark and claims responsibility. The two move away from the camera but not from an open microphone, and we hear Mireles whisper, "You show him mercy now, and he won't show any of us any mercy if he gets an opportunity. They have never had any compassion toward anyone. Never. Squeeze any confession you can get from him and bury him—immediately." Of course, the captured narco will probably not be buried alive (or he might), but he will be interrogated, perhaps tortured, and then most likely executed. This is the kind of justice that a brutal social condition allows. The implication is that if the federal police were doing its job, then Mireles wouldn't have to employ such methods. They are not, and the only way to be just and distribute burdens equally is through the unbiased, objective, and impersonal implementation of the unspoken Machiavellian rule: repay severity with more severity, brutality with brutality. The captured narco is not a human being in this scene; he is a threat and, until the moment of his death, a source of information and nothing else.

Brutality is the cold disregard for the suffering of another, which in turn demands (in accordance with its paradoxical logic) that one treat the other as an object so as to disregard that suffering. Experiencing the other as a nonhuman other—undeserving of respect, generosity, or life itself—requires that the other is found within a nexus, or a circumstance of perceptions, beliefs, and ways of life, that facilitates the objectification. The circumstance is thus one that *allows* and *permits* the exception of the other as disposable despite his face and his language; the circumstance, I insist, is itself brutal. This is why a violent act that is endowed with this extra qualification as brutal appears, phenomenologically, to be more than violent. The decapitation is, we say, unnecessarily violent; the brutality of

49. Translations of dialogue are my own.

the act points to something about the situation itself that we can't easily pinpoint in the performance of the act. This is because, in a sense, the decapitation is an "appropriate" response to a call of a situation, to the *form of life* that contextualizes it. Brutality is thus experienced as *outside* the subject—as belonging to the situation, to the form of life, to the conditions in which the brutal acts occur. It can thus be said to be something extrasubjective that binds others in the same situation to brutality, just as we can say that something extrasubjective binds believers in the Buddhist temple or a Franciscan monastery to generosity or renunciation.

Brutality and Silence

The horrific acts that appear to transgress the limits of acceptable violence—those acts that are more than what we can handle and in their violence force us to utter paradoxical statements like "They didn't have to kill him like that!" or "Hanging them would've been enough; they didn't have to cut out their hearts and stuff them in their mouths!"—also call *us* into question. And as we struggle to answer, to respond to the questioning, we fall silent. Brutality leaves us *speechless*.

The speechlessness brought about by brutality—the silence it provokes—is something to consider. We notice that it is not the silence of cruelty, which as essentially subjective always refers us to that about which we have a lot to say—namely, others who, were it not for their obvious psychological deficiency, are just like us. Cruelty provokes discussion, that is, because in thinking that we know ourselves, we think we know cruelty's source, its limits, and its ends. About brutality, or that violence that is ingrained in the social fabric, we have less to say. Silence is part of its logic; brutality works in silence in the background of cultural modalities such as narco-culture, and its acts are meant to provoke silence in return (or as a form of repetition). Cruelty, in contrast, is always called out: we call out the cruelty of exploitation or the cruelty of animal treatment, and we do so because there is always *someone* to blame. The extreme violence, codified and silent, that brings about the decapitation of persons and the murder of children does not have a *someone*. The extreme violence that we witness in narco-culture is not sensitive to humanity and is not called out. So it is not cruelty that we are witnessing; it is brutality, and cruelty and brutality, I repeat, are not the same.

Ultimately, brutality forces us into one of three silences: the silence of shock, the silence of indifference, and the silence of renunciation. The image of the chopped-up remains of three men left in black plastic bags on the side of the road in Veracruz[50] provokes the *silence of shock*: What can we say? How can we describe the scene? There are no words. A repetition of these sorts of images will make this silence permanent and normal. The normalization of these sorts of acts, which are repeated and reproduced in the cultural machinery of narco-culture, provokes the *silence of indifference*: This is the way things are. There is nothing more to say. Which brings us finally to the *silence of renunciation*, the attempt to gain a spiritual foothold on the permanence of brutality—to not even *attempt* to find the words to describe the carnage, the inhumanity. The Wittgensteinian command seems fitting: whatever cannot be spoken must be passed over in silence.

The moral and political implications of these silences, however, are serious. One consequence is that we are left to accept the atrocities and live with the catastrophes of mass murder. Another is that we are forced to be witnesses to the spectacle of a politics that marginalizes the violence as the product of events and groups outside of its control. And still another is that we are forced to live with the existence of such rampant brutality without thinking about it—without lending it or giving it thought. However, it is not the point of the present work to offer these solutions; the point here is to draw attention to the phenomenological effect that brutality appears to have, one in which words no longer work, one in which brutality itself robs us of our language.

INTUITIVE EXCESS (BACK TO KANT)

Again, we ask, Is narco-violence—a violence that is more than violence—a manifestation of *cruel* dispositions in common, bound together by the capitalist allure of narco-trafficking? Or is this excessive violence the structural condition of a brutal culture or, more generally, of a brutal *form of life*? More importantly, why does the distinction between cruel dispositions and brutal cultures matter?

50. "Encuentran cuerpos descuartizados."

Our reply is that narco-violence, or excessive violence, is symptomatic of a brutal culture or a brutal form of life and that the distinction matters because any normative or juridical response to excessive violence will miss the mark if its focus is on the cruelty of agents rather than on the brutality of its culture. Cruel is the being of an individual in a culture who enjoys the excessive violence; brutal is the being of the culture itself when its social structures promote (even if for the sake of survival) violent excess, where its participants seem to act as if there is no choice but to partake in the excess and to promote it themselves. The distinction matters because language matters: calling an act or a set of acts cruel isolates the perpetrators in their cruelty, in their subjective pathologies, but thinking about the acts as brutal points to a generalized brutality, the root of which lies in the ideology, politics, and those extrasubjective cultural modalities that are better addressed through social action rather than individual punishment.

My claim in making these distinctions between violence and brutality and brutality and cruelty is that violence as a concept is overly saturated by the intuited givenness of the brutal act—that is, the experience of *excessive* violence overflows violence, making it incapable of accurately referring to the act. Violence on its own underdetermines the brutal act. Again, we experience this failure in our speech when we talk about excessive or extreme violence, homicidal violence, incomprehensible violence, irrepressible violence, and so on.

CHAPTER 4

On Personhood

OR, *EL POZOLE*: TOWARD THE ABSOLUTE DEREALIZATION OF THE OTHER

It is no doubt possible to create conditions under which men are dehumanized, but this does not mean that they become animal-like; and under such conditions, not rage and violence, but their conspicuous absence is the clearest sign of dehumanization.

—Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*

In the previous chapter, we called the violence of narco-culture brutality. We said that in accordance with brutality's logic, one cannot be brutal toward objects; one can only be brutal toward persons. However, in order to brutalize a person, brutality's logic demands that the person be objectified, in which case, brutality disappears (since, again, one cannot be brutal toward objects). We ask, Where does brutality go? From a phenomenological standpoint, brutality recedes into the background or, said a different way, brutality fades into the noise of everyday being. This receding, or fading, however, is not a disappearing per se but a normalization. The result is that in turning persons into objects, certain contexts make it *normal* to be brutal to persons without it *seeming* as if it is persons who are being brutalized—that is, the context objectifies the person, and the person, being an object, cannot be subject to brutality. I called this the brutality paradox.

The paradoxical logic of brutality helps us make sense of the ubiquitous yet silent violence of narco-culture, where through the objectification of persons as disposable and killable bodies, the brutal violence done against

them *as objectified* becomes commonplace and familiar. This process of objectification of persons into object-bodies or criminal-bodies, enemies or narcos, renders persons invisible and, replaced by object-bodies, subject to an annihilation that is not brutality, that is not violence, but is merely a destruction of *things* (of obstacles, of obstructions, or of problems). In other words, what we see in brutality's logic is that in order to submit another to excessive violence—to harm, ruin, or destroy the other with acts of extreme, unsayable, or unimaginable violence (i.e., in order to be brutal toward another)—that other must first be objectified. The other must be imaginatively rendered into a thing, an object, so that one is not being brutal to it (him or her). We have, then, a violence that does not register in the algorithms of moral outrage because its victims are not persons but vague entities, things, objects, representations, classes, and so on; they are criminals, immigrants, jihadists, drug dealers, and so on. In the presence of carnage, death, and destruction, we consequently tend to focus not on the culture itself but on *ideas*—the dead were terrorists, kidnappers, Mexicans, Africans, narcos. Brutality, in its ontological aspect, then, hides behind the idealization, dehumanization, or objectification of the other. Moreover, the more this logic operates, the longer it is deployed, and the less it is seen, the less it is noticed—the less it surprises, shocks, or calls for a response.

The kind of reduction of the human required by brutality is suggested in Max Scheler's definition of brutality, which we have adopted as central to our argument. It will serve us to cite it again:

> In contrast to cruelty, "brutality" is merely a disregard of the other people's experience, despite the apprehension of it in feeling. Thus, to regard a human being as a mere log of wood and to treat the object accordingly, is not to be "brutal" towards him. On the other hand, it is characteristic of brutality that, given merely a sense of life, undifferentiated, as yet, into separate experiences, given even the fact of an enhanced appearance of life or a tendency towards it, any violent interruption of this tendency . . . is enough to mark it as brutal.[1]

1. Scheler, *Nature of Sympathy*, pp. 37–50.

Adhering to this definition and to the *logic* that it suggests, we thus say that in a culture of brutality, such as narco-culture, the objectification, dehumanization, or transfiguration of persons into destructible objects—logs of wood or corpses—is a possibility inscribed in the culture itself. These transfigurations, idealizations, or derealizations ultimately authorize any brutal act that may be committed against them, since, as logs of wood or corpses, brutalizing them does not count as brutality.

In this chapter, we think about what we believe to be an extreme consequence of brutality when it becomes ontological—when it becomes normalized as a form of life in the everyday being of events, persons, and things. This consequence, as we will see, is the total objectification, idealization, or derealization of persons and the effects that brutality's objectifying processes ultimately have, or could have, on our practical and theoretical conception of personhood itself. As we understand it, the logic of brutality achieves its most extreme form with practices that, in their brutality, bring about the *absolute derealization* of persons—that is, the total erasure of persons and their bodies in rituals of deconstruction that negate the possibility of cultural, political, or moral recognition. In narco-culture, such absolute derealization is illustrated in the practice of erasing all traces of a person through the process of liquefaction—namely, practices that transform human bodies into what is commonly known as posol or *guiso*: human stew.

POSOL: "THE VERY FULLNESS OF BARBARITY"

Pozoleando, or "making posol," is a common practice in narco-culture involving "the degradation of human bodies in a vat of acid and other substances."[2] The barbarity of this practice surprises even those who are used to extreme violence, and it speaks not only to the *otherness* of this practice in relation to violence (and so to the brutality of the practice) but also to our own moral ignorance.

A newspaper story from 2017 introduces us to the practice:

2. Cordona, "La raza, el horror, la condena."

> The world was shocked with the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Women and children dead. But in Veracruz, as well as in the rest of the country, there are worse things. . . . Five young men were kidnapped in Tierra Blanca by a police squadron from the Department of Public Safety. The young men were then handed over to criminals [*malandros*] who cooked them into a stew [*pozoleados*]. This is the hell called Veracruz. That is: if besides kidnapping, disappearing, assassinating, and burying people in clandestine graves, we now introduce the *pozoleada* of human bodies as was done here, then we have arrived at the very fullness of barbarity.[3]

To dissolve human bodies in vats of acid—or barrels of diesel, as is more often the case—is one of those acts that, without witnessing it ourselves, makes us question the very limits of what *we can imagine* human beings of capable of doing to other human beings. Philosophically speaking, this practice forces us to reconsider our most basic moral intuitions, and we ask, What are the limits of the harm we can inflict, or allow to be inflicted, on the other?

When confronted with the fact of this practice, we ask the following, as if these deaths were already necessary deaths, as if these murders were already justified: Why couldn't they just bury them, deep enough, so as not to be found? Why did they have to dissolve them *in acid*? We could imagine here a need to get rid of incriminating evidence, to wipe all traces of a crime. In the conditions of brutality we are aiming to highlight, we could also imagine a need to completely and absolutely erase all traces of humanity, a demand to derealize the object/corpse beyond its already objectified state, to undo the entirety of a person's presence, and to do so to an excessive degree—namely, to a pure and absolute nothingness. In contexts where brutality already operates as an ontological condition, this is more than an imaginative exercise; it is a fact of human coexistence.

While there are many instances recorded of this practice in Mexican narco-lore, the most famous has to do with the capture of a "cook" named Santiago Meza López, who for $600 "disappeared" hundreds (if not thousands) of people for the Tijuana-based Arellano-Félix Organization (also

3. Velázquez, "El pozolero de Veracruz."

known as the Tijuana Cartel).[4] Meza was a simple day laborer who perfected the "cooking" process: first, he would dismember the bodies before placing them in a fifty-two-gallon tub filled with sodium hydroxide and water, and then he would boil the contents for eight hours until the body parts were completely dissolved. If something did not dissolve in the process—say, teeth or certain bones—he burned them with gasoline. If that did not work, he would bury whatever was left. The goal was the absolute erasure of any traces of the person. The resiliency of the human body itself was Meza's eventual downfall. His capture was due to the discovery of a mass grave where Meza dumped whatever bodily fragments he could not dissolve.[5]

Here we see the very *fullness* of barbarity, of irrepressible violence, represented by the *attempt* at the absolute derealization of human persons in acts that surely transcend the limits of violence and punishment. (I emphasize *attempt* because, as we see with Meza, the body itself prevented its absolute erasure. As we continue, we will thus talk about a "quasi-absolute" derealization.) Turning someone into stew for the sake of erasing any trace of his or her human existence, and for the sake of the demands of narco-culture, speaks to an objectification that no longer responds to an ontological difference (the difference between objects and things). In this case, humanity is literally dissolved into the ether of brutality.

We can choose to rationalize this process as barbaric, as the journalist above does; we can choose to rationalize it as an act of blind *cruelty* by Meza himself and those who pay him; or we can point to the culture that allows it, a culture where brutality is expected and required for the proper functioning of the culture. Thus we say that this process is a logical consequence not of barbarians or psychopaths but of civilized society. This is a society in which brutality has achieved a utilitarian function—where brutality feeds the machinery of narco-trafficking with the dead as its material resource, where the waste and excess of the cultural machinery are disposed of in efficient yet equally brutal ways.

It could be said, however, that the act of turning someone into stew has a merely epistemological value—that is, that its more immediate value

4. Lacey, "Mexican Man Admits Using Acid."
5. "La huella que dejó 'El Pozolero.'"

(in narco-culture) seems to lie in the spectacle of the act, in *knowing* of its possibility. Its value lies in the *horror* it invokes. However, as the case of Meza demonstrates, the act of making posol is not essentially tied to spectacle; by the time of his capture, no one *knew* who and how many Meza had *disappeared* in this way. As another "cook" explains, the process is done with the utmost secrecy and discretion and is meant to completely erase all traces of a person's existence from the very face of the earth:

> The kitchen is a place you've set up for this specific purpose. It has to be deep in the mountains, far from the roads and from the city. There you take the persons you're holding along with some barrels. You've seen those 200 liter barrels with three little lines across? One, two, three, well starting from the second line and to the bottom you drill a bunch of holes and then you place the barrel near a river or a well. Once there, you put the person in head first and you start to pour diesel on to it. With the help of 20 liters of diesel you disappear anyone from this world. . . . It takes about half an hour [of pouring diesel] until nothing remains of you.[6]

Thus the wish to terrorize is superseded by the fact that in liquefying a human being—in changing his or her chemistry to such an extent that nothing remains of the being who once dreamed, desired, and loved—an *absolute* and total erasure has taken place that has no value outside the utilitarian end previously mentioned: disposing of a body that is taking up space and time. This quasi-absolute erasure is the ultimate consequence of a brutal ontology where excess and violence delineate the limits of the real. The attempt to absolutely erase persons is the final consequence of a brutal culture.

PERSONS, BODIES, CORPSES

In the Jardines de Humaya—the necropolis of the narco—we find the almost obsessive and excessive attempt to *preserve* the memory, identity, and likeness (in pictures and engravings) of the dead. But more than that, we are met with the *monumental* effort to preserve a trace of a power

6. Osorno, "Entrevista con un Zeta."

once held, of nobility, and of real (material) success in the economy of narco-culture. The act of liquefying and dissolving the human body until *nothing recognizable* remains is the opposite of this kind of preservation. It is an absolute *erasure* of all things that constitute particular subjecthood—an attempted erasure of identity, likeness, any sort of claim to a life lived.

The previous statement makes an assumption that we are now forced to think about—namely, that persons are somehow their bodies so that liquefying a body is to destroy a person. This assumption can take us deep into the history of philosophy, especially into that of modern philosophy, where David Hume tells us that the core of our personhood, our personal identity, is not our body but merely a bundle of perceptions. As another example, John Locke says that identity is essentially connected to memory. Locke says that the concept of person "belongs only to intelligent agents, capable of law, and happiness, and misery. This personality extends itself beyond present existence to what is past, only by consciousness—whereby it becomes concerned and accountable."[7] This leads us to think that the destruction of the body is not the destruction of the person. Contemporary philosophy, however, insists on something else: our consciousness is embodied; our body is intentional. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for instance, refers to his body as the "fabric onto which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my 'comprehension.'"[8] Thus without the body, there is no comprehension and no experience, no extension "beyond present existence to what is past," and so on, which means that destroying it is sufficient to destroy our personhood. The embodiment of personhood is already implied in the word itself, in *person*, which in the Latin means "mask," or that thing that represents and presents *what and who* we are *in the world*.

Thus to disintegrate the human body to the extent that is done in making posol is to violate the integrity of that which marks the essence of being a human being. This idea can be traced as well to the ancient Greeks. As Giorgio Agamben notes, for the Greeks, the corpse itself represented "unity after death," the coming together of life and death in one body or, in other words, the climactic moment of a life. Agamben writes

7. Locke, *John Locke Reader*, p. 184.
8. See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 235.

that "our term 'life' . . . originally meant only 'corpse,' almost as if life in itself, which for the Greeks was broken down to a plurality of forms and elements, appeared only as a unity after death."[9] We note here a fundamental respect for the human body and for the preservation of it after death *as* a corpse. Dissolving this corpse in vats of acid can, therefore, be thought of as the ultimate violation of life itself, as it points to the impossibility of lending life that "unity after death" that is fundamental to our humanity.

Our embodiment (in life and death) consequently points to our essential vulnerability. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "Saying that I have a body is thus a way of saying that I can be seen as an object . . . that another can be my master."[10] If another can be my master and treat me as an object, then my body is always already exposed to death at his or her hands. That is, the other who sees me can kill me or turn me into posol *at any time*.

We do not need to dig too deeply into the history of philosophy, however, to see what it is about the person that is being erased in the process of turning them into posol. In addition to the body and our unity after death, what are being disposed of in this act are the possibilities of experience that go along with *being* a human being—namely, subjectivity or, as Michel Henry defines it, "the very fact of sensing or experiencing oneself and nothing else."[11] So that which is destroyed is also the possibility of experiencing oneself as a subject in the world. Thus when a person is turned into posol, also known as *guiso*, and poured down the drain, never to be seen or heard from again, what we *miss* about that person is his ability to affirm himself as a subject in the world—as an embodied, living human being. At the same time, what *we* miss is also what someone else thought of as an obstacle, as *objecting* to her own ability to experience herself—what became an *object* to someone else, what intervened or disturbed a process or the subjectivity (affirmation) of others, what became a problem (or a solution) to someone else's project and had to be objectified and disintegrated in this extreme way.

9. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 66.
10. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 167.
11. Henry, *On Barbarism*, p. 6.

The purpose of insisting on the philosophical notion of the person is to get a more robust view as to what it is that is being destroyed when the person is first objectified by a cultural process and then subjected to a brutality that transcends death. Thus we affirm that a "person" is an embodied being-in-the-world situated in social contexts with others. This summary definition appeals to the phenomenological insights of figures like Merleau-Ponty while distancing itself from those theories that locate personhood in something like the rational capacities of the ego—for example, Locke, Descartes, and the tradition they initiate.

When we think of the person in this way, an act of brutality achieves a complete totalization of the person when it objectifies the body, re-placing it in objective space, and thereby taking it as a site of and for violence, ruin, and degradation. Once objectified, simple violence against the body is not enough, since an object resists its annihilation through its temporal permanence—it does not speak but remains *there* as a corpse; thus there must be more done to the body if annihilation is to take place. It must be cut to pieces, reduced, undone, derealized, decapitated, dismembered, dissolved, degraded beyond all recognition. For the process of objectification to be successful, an absolute erasure must be the goal.

We are left to wonder about the cultural axiology that would allow this sort of degradation to be possible.

VALUES AND THE UTILITARIAN CONCEPTION OF THE PERSON

From a (morally neutral) utilitarian perspective, the brutal dismemberment and dematerializing of a human body are justified on the basis that he *got in the way*, that his very presence was an obstacle that obstructed in some way—more specifically, that the body-as-object of the person was a *something* that got in the way of some goal or process. The dissolution of the human body until it is liquid for the sake of a greater utilitarian imperative (in this case, the economy of narco-culture) points to a cultural attitude where the *value* of the person has been drastically compromised. This devaluation or value inversion makes his dismemberment, dissolution, dematerialization, liquefaction, and so on and the brutality required for the act just another fact—something that *just happens* in the culture.

This devaluation of persons does not take place in an imaginary or abstract space, in a work of fiction or film. This devaluation takes place in a real world and within an actual horizon of experience where the value of the person operates within a multitude of heterogeneous attitudes and intentional acts attributable to actual human persons, such as acts of thinking, remembering, expecting, planning, and hating and acts of feeling or emotion—of loving, of dreaming, of communicating, and of creating. In this horizon, the devaluation of persons also means that the value placed on allowing others to express these attitudes or engage in these acts is inverted.

A slight detour into value theory allows us to bring this into greater focus. Once again, Max Scheler's phenomenology helps us in this regard. Scheler presents what is called a "functional account of values," an account that aims to describe how the value placed on a particular thing, event, or behavior depends on the *function* it plays in a particular social context and on whether that function is *preferred* as valuable by that social context. Thus to value is to prefer, and what is preferred is what functions for the good of society. For example, in the industrialized West, we value a strong work ethic because a strong work ethic leads to economic success, and we value economic success because that is how this society *prefers* to judge the "good life." As another example, the value placed on caring for the suffering of another will depend on the way that such caring is thought about in that culture; put differently, the value of caring for another's suffering is held in higher esteem in cultures where caring for others *functions for the sake of* other cultural values that that culture prefers—values like justice, community, and spiritual health. According to Scheler, values are functional because they *do something*: "Values must enter into a function with something in order for them to be."[12] This means that values are not a priori Platonic ideals instantiated imperfectly by imperfect human beings. Rather, values reflect the attitudinal tendencies of social systems; we can say that they reflect the preferences of the people in that system, what they think *ought* or *ought not* to be allowed, preferred, or enjoyed. Ultimately, the existence of a certain value depends on the functional ability of that value to reinforce the performance of acts that reflect that preference.

12. Frings, *Mind of Max Scheler*, p. 24.

Conversely, the nonexistence of a value depends on the nonexistence of the preference that demands that function. For instance, the value that Aztec culture placed on human sacrifice depended on an Aztec preference for rising suns and good harvests that their complex cosmology said involved blood offerings to the heavens. Absent preferences for an ordered universe and food subsistence, as well as the myth relating to the causal relationship between gods and humans, life and death, human sacrifice would have no function and hence no value.

Consequently, the presence of specific values in a particular culture has to do with the presence of certain kinds of people with kinds of preferences that Scheler calls "self-generating feeling states" (Gefühlszustände).[13] It is possible, then, because of the self-generation of feeling states, that an entire culture could be characterized by similar values. According to Scheler, the specific preferences of entire cultures can be seen by the particular values that are functional in that culture. Scheler's hierarchy of values suggests five different kinds of *value-cultures*, each prioritizing (or *preferring*) one kind of value over all others:

1. *Culture of the holy.* This is the highest form of culture, since this is the highest kind of value—namely, the "value of the holy." In this culture, the community tends to prefer spiritual connections with and sympathy and love for all creatures as well as the constant development of a personal and communal relationship with God.
2. *Intellectual culture.* This culture prioritizes rational and intellectual virtues, it values achievements of the human mind, and it includes aesthetic values, juridical values, and philosophical values.
3. *Vital culture.* Here, life values such as nobility, willpower, and strength of character are prioritized; heroism is valued as well so that cultural heroes are central to this culture.
4. *Pragmatic culture.* This culture values what is useful and rejects what is not useful; success is prioritized as well as the means and technologies that bring it about.

13. Frings, p. 26.

5. *Utilitarian culture*.[14] This culture prioritizes "sensible values," or those values that help bring about pleasure and lend themselves to the avoidance of pain; a utilitarian culture is committed to the pursuit of individual pleasures and does not prioritize other-directed values such as sympathy, generosity, or care.[15]

A culture of violence will not be a culture where the values of the holy, truth, beauty, and reason are preferred. In narco-culture, as the epitome of violent culture, what is valued—what is preferred—is success in the illegal economy; the worship of money, power, and prestige; and the utility of pain and pleasure in the regulation of the narco form of life.

Thus in accordance with Scheler's value hierarchy, we can say that narco-culture is governed by vital, pragmatic, and sensible values. We see this preference for vital values in the Jardines de Humaya, where burial rites play on established cultural inclinations to appear noble, strong, and powerful even in death. We also see this preference in the violent impulse, which points to the value of subduing others to one's power. We see pragmatic values manifested in the rules and codes that exist in narco-culture itself. Respect, silence, loyalty, deception, and cruelty are values shared in the culture because they *work*—because they contribute to success in the economic mechanisms of the culture. The last of these, sensible values, which represents the lowest form of culture with the "lowest value rank,"[16] serves as a condition for the possibility of unmitigated brutality and murder. In an environment where faith in God or a concern for the spiritual health of the people (spiritual culture) is lacking or where education or the cultivation of intellectual virtues (intellectual culture) is missing, my interactions with others will also lack or have no need for my capacity for empathy or my willingness to sympathize with another's suffering. In these cultural spaces, where values are at their lowest, I do not encounter others through a noematic haze that announces them as spiritually valuable or possessing their own internal worth; I see

14. Scheler calls the value that underlies this culture not "utilitarian" but "sensible," but it is clear that what matters in this rank is the "utility" or "usefulness" of the value for the enjoyment of pleasure and the avoidance of pain.
15. Frings, *Mind of Max Scheler*, pp. 26–30.
16. Frings, p. 29.

them as means to ends, as obstacles or intermediaries, as useful or useless, and their existence benefits or threatens mine in very specific ways. Said differently, I see them not as persons but as nonpersons and their bodies not as "unities of life" but as "body objects" that can be used for the sake of pragmatic or sensible goals.

Echoing Scheler, we see that when considering the phenomena of narcoculture, pragmatic, vital, and sensible values predominate. These three values, however, coalesce into the lowest value in the hierarchy—namely, the "sensible" or "utilitarian." Irrepressible violence and brutality suggest *a utilitarian conception of the person*. That is, persons are valued insofar as they are powerful and useful, and both of these (power and utility) are valued for the sake of a culture where the pleasure of excess is valued most of all. A utilitarian conception of the person allows for the perception of and relations with persons as objects of utility and not as subjects of respect, sympathy, or reverence.

Seeing the other as a nonperson means that the other's brutalization to the point of death is not tied to any humanistic morality. According to Scheler, the ethical imperatives that prohibit the killing of another human being do not apply when the other is not an entity that can instantiate, enforce, or affirm values, since only a person can engage in such acts. Related to this, Scheler makes a distinction between killing and murder. Murder is only possible among persons. One can kill an animal and even the environment or a process, but not others. This means that the other's murder is simultaneously her dehumanization, the erasure of her personhood. Manfred Frings, interpreting Scheler, sums it up: "Murder pertains to the extinction of an individual given as person and his self-value."[17]

17. Frings, p. 48. The question is raised as to the justification for killing in times of war. According to Frings, in such cases, "the enemy is not given as personal either and can, therefore, only be killed as an anonymous group" (pp. 48–49). On Frings's reading of Scheler, then, war is a horizon for the possibility of stripping the other of humanity. War would apply to the Hobbesean precovenant war of all against all as well as to the Levinasian state of primordial violence from which consciousness first emerges. Unlike these thinkers, Scheler does not presuppose a violent origin for human coexistence or human sociality. Like Michel Henry after him, he believes that violence, or war, realizes itself in the process of human coexistence, and it usually has to do with the breakdown of those values that keep us morally bound to and responsible for one another. Thus there are societies in which war, in any of its possible manifestations (the Vietnam War, the War in Afghanistan, the War on Terror, the War on Drugs,

Here, the logic of brutality, as I have already discussed, is seen on an even larger scale. In a utilitarian culture, murder is rare, as is brutality, because these apply not to persons but to things or objects. All you see is the spectacle of chaos and dead bodies. The logic of brutality asks us to forget the reality of the person so that what is killed or dismembered is nothing but an object, *a log of wood*.

VIOLENCE AND SPECTACLE

The dissolution of persons in the making-posol ritual takes advantage of their utilitarian value in narco-culture. More importantly, the ritual obeys a cultural logic that lends it intelligibility and a cultural ontology that allows it. This suggests that the ritual itself is not strictly utilitarian (even if the person is conceived under these terms); its purpose, that is, does not always obey a consequentialist logic where it brings about a greater (relative) economic or cultural benefit. Its utility or, better yet, its instrumentality seems to rest solely on the fact that it is a form of erasure—*evidence tampering* at its worst—and thus any cultural benefit that it may bring about (as garish as the idea of liquefying a person for cultural utility may sound) is not intentional. More directly put, while it can be at times instrumental, serving a means-to-end rationality, brutality in narco-culture is foundational to the form of life. It is what the culture itself requires.

One might object to the idea that brutality is not *strictly* an instrument, a means to an end, by reaffirming that this kind of brutality toward human bodies is itself utilitarian in a simpler sense—that is, the utility of the brutal act, its use, rests on the fear that it instills in the population. Its utility is the *spectacle* it creates, the *horror* it produces. This follows from the notion that the production of horror through violence and brutality has always been an efficient means of social control. This objection would have it that brutality is *always* an instrument, always utilitarian. Of course, the objection would have merit if there were no exceptions. However, turning someone into posol is the exception that shows the

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etc.), makes possible the dehumanization of others so that the value of the others' pain has no worth—where, for instance, selfish enjoyment replaces sympathy.

institutionalization of brutality as a form of life, apart from the consequentialist logic of specific acts of horror or spectacle. That is, liquefying a person is *not* done *for the sake* of spectacle. My view, as we will see in the sections that follow, is that the reason for dissolving a person-corpse is firmly outside the telos of spectacle. In order to better understand the previous comments, it is necessary to define the relationship between violence and spectacle.

Terrorist-produced videos of executions, beheadings, and bombings are meant to terrorize, manipulate, or psychologically torture their ideological enemies; televised executions in Saudi Arabia aim to enforce obedience to religious laws; newspaper accounts of hangings, electrocution, or lethal injections in American newspapers remind the populace that the death penalty is still an option and thus to think twice before violating the rule of law. In pre-Hispanic Mexico, where Aztec rituals were thought to be overly barbaric even by barbaric standards, brutal rituals held an entire cosmology together. Obeying the logic of spectacle, brutality was laid out in religious ceremonies meant to fulfill divine commands while educating the populace about established social and political sanctions. Their ultimate utility was spiritual. David Carrasco summarizes this view:

> Human sacrifice was based upon a unique and complex religious attitude. . . . In brief, it was believed that the human body was the vulnerable nexus of vital cosmic forces and was filled with divine essences that needed periodic regeneration. One means to this regeneration was called *teomiqui*, to die divinely or "dying like a god dies," which meant human sacrifice.[18]

The utilitarian deployment of violence for the purpose of social control continued after the Conquest and into the period of colonialization. There, violence took on a markedly instrumental function. Within a 1560 Mesoamerican codex, the Codex Coyoacán,[19] the Cholulan indigenous peoples record the manner in which Hernán Cortéz summarily executed

18. Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*, p. 73.
19. "Aperreamiento," from the Codex Coyoacán (1560), held at the National Library of France.

those who survived his sacking of the city of Cholula in October 1519. In gruesome images, prisoners, with hands bound, are put before a giant black dog that tears at their throats until they are dead—this as other *cholulteca* prisoners watch in horror. This is the practice of *appereamiento*, which means "death by dog"—from *aperrear*, or to sic dogs on someone until they die. Such rituals were meant to instill fear and terror in those who witnessed the scene and, more importantly, in those who came across its representation. In Aztec religious ceremonies, the spectacle was meant to instill the fear of the gods; in the *appereamiento*, the fear of Spanish power.

What these gruesome acts have in common is that they are meant to be seen, remembered, and visualized in memory. Their essence is their representational character—namely, that they are spectacle, whether religious, ideological, or political. This gives them their meaning. This quality of being spectacle is no accident: the gruesome, the bloody, the incomprehensible has to insert itself into an already existing form of intelligibility in order to have meaning, in order to exercise its instrumentality. In Guy Debord's characterization, the spectacle is—in our hyperconsumerist, advanced capitalist societies—the very means by which persons relate themselves to each other. He writes, "The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images."[20] If we think of the *appereamiento* carried out by Cortéz and his men as a form of spectacle (even if that was not a hyperconsumerist, advanced capitalist society), then we can say that the spectacle was not the images on the codex but what the images reproduced—namely, *meaning* or, more precisely, the meaning that mediates intersubjective communication. This points to the most significant aspect of the spectacle: it is mediation disguised as the immediate, representation as presentation. Debord writes,

> The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of that life can no longer be recovered. Fragmented views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a separate pseudoworld that can only be looked at. The specialization of images of the world evolves into a world of autonomized images where even the

20. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 12.

> deceivers are deceived. The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving.[21]

Moreover, he says,

> The concept of spectacle unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena. . . . Considered in its own terms, the spectacle is affirmation of appearance and affirmation of all human life, namely social life, as mere appearance. But the critique which reaches the truth of the spectacle exposes it as the visible negation of life, as a negation of life which has become visible.[22]

The spectacle intends to call attention to itself, to attract vision to its reality that is not reality but appearance and representation, spreading itself out into "every aspect of life." As such, all appearances and all representations seek to fit within this "pseudoworld that can only be looked at," to construct themselves so as to become the focal point of the *visible*.

Can we think of the practice of making posol as obeying this "logic" of the spectacle? If we think that the goal of dismembering and liquefying a person is to cause horror or terror, then the answer is yes. As we will see, however, making posol does not obey this logic; this practice is not meant to cause horror or terror (even if, in fact, it does *in time* produce horror and terror).

THE SPECTACLE OF HORROR

The claim of this book is that brutality is more than violence; it is a hyperviolence of a different order that, in its excess, renders us speechless. We name the violence of narco-culture brutality so as to properly capture the otherwise unsayable and unspeakable acts that are perpetrated in that cultural context and others like it. However, it is not in the *essence* of brutality, as a form of what Étienne Balibar called "ultra-objective" and Slavoj

21. Debord, section 2.
22. Debord, section 10.

Žižek "objective" violence,[23] to call attention to itself; it does not seek to obey the logic of the spectacle. Thus I claim that brutality is likewise other than horror or terror (just as it is different from cruelty or barbarism) and that the principal difference is that brutality, unlike horror or terror, does not (necessarily) desire to be seen.

An excellent study of horror and terror is carried out by Adriana Cavarero in *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*.[24] Already in the subtitle, Cavarero alludes to one of the underlying premises of our present reflections on narco-violence—namely, that contemporary violence has no name and that, in fact, "its meaning [is] taken for granted so as to avoid defining it."[25] She continues, "As violence spreads and assumes unheard-of forms, it becomes difficult to name in contemporary language."[26] For Cavarero, one of these "unheard-of forms" is the modern-day practice of using suicide bombers to carry out terrorist acts. Describing this, she writes, "What is new is the way in which the massacre is now perpetrated: a body that blows itself up in order to rip other bodies to pieces."[27] This, she argues, is beyond terror and beyond horror, and so she calls it "horrorism" (a neologism that marries *horror* and *terrorism*).

Cavarero locates the reality of the concept of horrorism in the context of the contemporary War on Terror and within other contexts where extreme politics have given way to the extermination of countless helpless lives (e.g., the Holocaust). A terrorist is, she says, in fact, a "horrorist."[28] In our case, we locate brutality *outside* the context of (traditional) war and extreme politics; we find it as the operational ontology of a contemporary, civilized society.

Horrorism is a form of extreme violence instrumentalized to produce the greatest terror in the contemporary theater of war, where combatants and noncombatants are indistinguishable and usually suffer similar fates. Appealing to its etymology, Cavarero defines *terror* as a "physical reaction to fear," with a "trembling," and with a taking flight; she writes that "terror

23. Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*; Žižek, *On Violence*.
24. Cavarero, *Horrorism*.
25. Cavarero, p. 2.
26. Cavarero, p. 2.
27. Cavarero, p. 29.
28. Cavarero, p. 87.

moves bodies" into a "collective panic."[29] Horror, which forms the other anchor of *horrorism*, "has to do with repugnance"[30]—with revulsion or disgust "in the face of a form of violence that appears more inadmissible than death, the body reacts as if nailed to the spot."[31] Thus while terror moves bodies through fear and trembling, horror paralyzes them in repugnance and surprise, and together, as horrorism, they announce the always possible exploitation of an always already vulnerable and exposed human being.

For Cavarero, horrorism finds its fulfillment in the brutal death of the most vulnerable. The victim, who is already nailed to her spot by circumstance, is nailed again by the image of a violence beyond comprehension and can only but tremble in fear; as the act takes place, she is raised to the level of gruesome spectacle for all to behold. Cavarero sums up the array of *meanings* that this spectacle produces:

> Repugnance wells up not so much because of the homicide in itself as because of the offence against vulnerable people who are also defenseless. On top of that, the body of the suicide bomber explodes and is dismembered in the very act of killing, shattering, and dismembering the bodies of others. And, on top of that, this violent body is also, sometimes, that of a woman. The indices of superabundance with respect to the figure of simple killing accumulate and multiply. It is not death, much less the death of the real or imagined enemy, that looms large. The crime discloses its profundity, going to the very roots of the human condition, which suffers offense at the ontological level.[32]

The violence that shatters, kills, and dismembers is "superabundant." And this superabundance cannot be wasted but is entered into the machinery of spectacle so as to cause "offense at the ontological level." The purpose of the act is fulfilled only when this offense is accomplished.

Ultimately, we can say that the trembling revulsion produced by horrorism has to do with the manner in which the extreme act of violence

29. Cavarero, pp. 5–6.
30. Cavarero, p. 7.
31. Cavarero, p. 8.
32. Cavarero, p. 32.

appears—it has to do with its representation, with the spectacle it produces. There is, writes Cavarero, "an affinity between horror and vision or, if you like, between a scene unbearable to look at and the repugnance it arouses."[33] It is similar with terror, where there exists a relation between what is seen and the physical reaction it provokes. In other words, in horrorism, the act becomes representation—a scene that must be seen or, per Debord, "the negation of life which has become visible."[34]

Cavarero's descriptions could easily be applied to the violence of narco-culture. Consider Shaylih Muehlmann's observation:

> The violence that has engulfed northern Mexico since 2006 often takes elaborate and ritualized forms that draw on the medium of the corpse as central to the semiotics of terror. On the morning of May 13, 2012, for example, forty-nine decapitated and dismembered bodies were found strewn across the highway to Reynosa in the northeastern state of Tamaulipas. This discovery came less than a week after eighteen dismembered corpses were found scattered over a highway in the western state of Jalisco.[35]

There is certainly an aspect of horrorism (of spectacle) to the violence described by Muehlmann, especially because it is *meant* to be seen and convey a message or dissuade encroachment on a particular *plaza*, or territory. Certainly, the forty-nine decapitated heads or the five naked torsos hanging from a bridge are meant to be seen. As the practice of making posol illustrates, however, brutality is not restricted to spectacle, which means that horrorism *cannot* be applied in a summary way to the violence of narco-culture. Hence we still need a new way to think about it—and we think about it as brutality.

So we return again to the question posed at the end of the last section, now slightly rephrased: Can we think of the practice of making posol as horrorism? We recall the essential nature of this practice—namely, to

33. Cavarero, p. 8.
34. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 8.
35. Muehlmann, *When I Wear*, p. 86.

conceal or *erase*. This concealment or erasure means that the act does not seek attention; it does not seek vision. In this sense, it is not horrorism. The repugnance it creates comes *after the fact*, when the act has been discovered by good detective work on the part of the police or the citizenry, but it does not seek it *in essence*.

Horrorism, as the spectacle of violence, does not apply to practices that, no matter how violent and gruesome, obscure themselves from the field of optics and representation. *Hearing* about these acts and *knowing* that they are normal practices in a particular cultural modality (e.g., narco-culture) will certainly horrify or terrorize, but this happens only after the practice is discovered. That is, the soup and the process of making it are *not meant* to be seen; they are not meant to be spectacle; they are not meant to horrify or terrify an audience that is already on edge. Violence for the sake of spectacle has its place in narco-culture, but not always, and certainly not with its most brutal acts. Brutality's hidden intentionality points to its place outside the space of horror, the space of terror, and the space of vision.

DEREALIZATION

The reduction of persons to bare matter is not meant to be spectacle. It is not a horrorist act such as, say, a child suicide bomber blowing himself up in a crowded market in Mosul. However, it is still a brutal act—it is located at the extremes of brutality. Its brutality shows itself in the manner in which the person as body (or corpse) is expelled from the realm of the real, of humanity, and into an ideal nothingness—a realm where no one exists nor has ever existed.

The question for us is the following: How does dissolving a corpse, thus erasing all traces of a person from the face of the earth, become a real option in a real human community? The specificity of this question suggests that there are *no other ways* of achieving such complete and anonymous erasure (i.e., erasure not subject to the law of spectacle). But of course there are: mass narco-graves (*narco-fosas*) are as common in Mexico today as mass graves were in Nazi Germany or other places in human history where the goal of genocidal political action was to eradicate entire

classes of human beings from the planet.[36] In both cases, the lack of *traces* (grave markers, fingerprints, etc.) suggests that these practices become real options for a culture where there is a real historical sense about *who* deserves sympathy and who does not and about those who deserve to be neither alive nor remembered. Erasing them—that is, dissolving their bodies (making posol) or hiding them from sight (in narco-graves)—is thus a way to act on these preestablished notions of personhood.

The concept of derealization that we find in Judith Butler's post-9/11 manifesto, *Precarious Life*, can help us make sense of the *rational* processes involved in deciding *who* is subject to erasure or anonymous destruction (i.e., destruction not subject to the law of spectacle). Through a phenomenology of mourning, Butler reveals loss and grief as themselves revealing of a foundational vulnerability to human sociality. When we mourn the death of the other, we are mourning not only the loss of the other but also the loss of our relationality with her. My communion with her is missing, and through mourning, I feel as though I am "missing something." This suggests that being-with-others is a foundational requirement of my own life, but it is also a vulnerable one, since my loved one's death is likely to shatter those foundations. Her death makes me foundationless, or groundless. Mourning is an expression of this groundlessness, but more importantly, it is an expression of what she meant to my own sense of being human—and I know this because her absence makes me *less than* what I was when she was present before me.

This brief excursion into Butler's theory of mourning highlights one important aspect about human sociality—namely, that I mourn only those to whom I am (in specified and unspecified ways) related. What about those bodies to which I am not related? Are they not mourned? This is a ridiculous question, since it is obvious that all bodies are or have been in communion with other bodies, even if not with my own. The fact is that *there are* bodies that are not mourned, that are unmournable; what about *those* bodies, not mourned because they are neither alive nor dead but simply and desperately *missing*? What about those bodies that, unbeknown to me or to their loved ones, have been dissolved into nothing or buried in secret graves? These questions, however, are not meant for us;

36. An excellent study of narco-graves is found in Aguirre, *Nuestro espacio doliente*.

these questions are meant for a cultural attitude (or a culture itself) that allows or justifies bodies to disappear without a trace and, thus, without the possibility of mourning.

Butler's notion of derealization emerges from thinking about why some people are considered, by society or by culture, to be eligible for mourning. She asks, "Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What *makes for a grievable life*?"[37] The answers to these questions will reveal *who* it is that deserves to be grieved, but more importantly, they will point to *why* a cultural attitude may emerge that finds it justifiable not to mourn for some people—a lack of mourning that may also justify their brutalization and their erasure.

Let us consider these questions. First, who counts as human? The answer seems to be anyone who is capable of mourning, anyone who deserves mourning, anyone with a "face," anyone who stands in embodied relationality with me; ultimately, to "count" as human is to have a face, to be in communion with others, and most importantly, to be embodied. Butler writes,

> The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well.[38]

It is through the body that my needs, my desires, and my life are manifested for others to see, to love, and to mourn. At the same time, however, it is my body—that which makes me a human being—that is also the site of violence and death.

Second, whose lives count as lives? Those that are public, that are seen, that are "socially constituted." Butler states,

> Each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of bodies—as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed. Loss and vulnerability seem to

37. Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 20 (my emphasis).
38. Butler, p. 26.

> follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at the risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.[39]

The paradox here is that the lives that count as lives are those that expose themselves to their own destruction. To be counted as a life, that life must be precariously invested in others with whom one is in communion but also invested with others who may exploit that precariousness and vulnerability in acts of violence.

Violence exposes our precariousness; it opens us to the realization that we are at constant risk of being killed by another. Vulnerability is thus at the core of our sociality. It is our vulnerability that connects us to others, but it is this same vulnerability that opens us up for violence and death. Our capacity to mourn the loss of another points to this essential connection. Our mourning reveals our fundamental incompleteness and our dependence. When the loved one dies, we lose a part of ourselves. "Let's face it," Butler writes, "we're undone by each other. And if we are not, we're missing something."[40] Violence thus enters the picture as the exploitation of my essential vulnerability. According to Butler, "Violence is, always, an exploitation of that primary tie, that primary way in which we are, as bodies, outside ourselves and for another."[41] And here we come upon an essential aspect of damaging the body of the other through violence or brutality—namely, it prohibits the possibility for sociality, and if the body is damaged beyond recognition, it also prohibits the possibility for mourning.

Which brings us to the third question: What lives count as "grieveable" lives? Ideally, all lives should count as grieveable lives. However, because grief and mourning point to an essential sociality, the inability to mourn or grieve for someone suggest that she was never in communion with others, that she didn't enter into sociality, that her body did not count as a body, and hence that she did not count as human and that her life did

39. Butler, p. 20.
40. Butler, p. 23.
41. Butler, p. 27.

not count as a life. So who are these nonhuman disembodied entities that should not be mourned?

In Butler's example, gays and lesbians during the AIDS epidemic illustrated a class of people whose deaths did "not even qualify as 'grieveable.'"[42] They were not grieveable deaths, moreover, because their lives were "unreal." They were those who, through certain "normative notions of the human," through what we may call *rational processes*, had "already suffered the violence of derealization."[43] *Derealization* is the transformation of concrete persons into abstractions, ideas, concepts, classes, "notions of the human," or some kind of fictionalized subjectivity. Derealized, the person is no longer human but an abstraction or an idea, and their lives do not count as lives; as abstractions, therefore, they cannot feel, bleed, die, and so on. In their abstraction, violence against them is not really violence against persons but violence against derealized unrealities. In this sense, violence disappears in the same way that brutality disappears (chapter 3). That is, for Butler, violence ceases to be violence when persons are turned into ideas; for us, brutality is no longer brutality when persons are turned into things.

The process of derealization mirrors a dehumanizing rationality that begins at "the level of discourse" and moves on to a "physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization already at work in the culture."[44] There is in this a two-step progression to derealization involving the framing of persons in a dehumanizing discourse followed by their marginalization to the realm of the nonhuman or the nonmournable. Fed into this dehumanizing machinery, persons are stripped of name, personality, desire, and so on and become anonymous, faceless—perhaps numbers or statistics but generally *unreal*. As with the logic of brutality, violence is permitted in the method of derealization because the one being violated is no longer human. Butler says, "If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated."[45]

42. Butler, p. 32.
43. Butler, p. 33.
44. Butler, p. 34.
45. Butler, p. 33.

Butler's notion of derealization can be easily applied to the narco-context. One could say that through that particular normative notion of the human that sees those who participate in the narco-life through a utilitarian lens, bodies in narco-culture have already been derealized; their lives have been made "unreal," turned into "ideas" or consumable objects (consumable in the economic machinery of narco-culture). As such, their lives are not lives, and they are already, before their deaths, not deserving of mourning.

In the brutal practice of making posol, the process of derealization is taken beyond the process of dehumanization that Butler suggests. The derealization, that is, is taken literally: the "enemy" is undeserving not only of mourning and grief but of any *possibility* of such mourning or grief even by his loved ones, which means that he must be *absolutely derealized*—turned into a nonreality, into an essential state of matter, into posol. Of course, as we saw with the case of Santiago Meza López, the human body's resistance to an absolute erasure forced him to bury body fragments in mass graves, which eventually led to his capture. Hence what we have is not an absolute derealization but a quasi-absolute derealization, an almost-erasure that nonetheless closes off the possibilities of mourning. In a passage that could have been written about this particular brutal practice or about narco-culture in general, Butler states,

> But [negated lives] have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). They cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never "were," and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness. Violence renews itself in the face of the apparent inexhaustibility of its object.[46]

It seems as if the practice of liquefying human bodies is motivated, in a particular gruesome and morally perverse way, by a knowledge that bodies "seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness." Of course, Butler was not talking about those gruesome practices that aim to dissolve human flesh into stew; however, the point is that if the other is already negated in life by some normative notion of the human (a social

46. Butler, p. 33.

stigmatization of narco-life), negated again by a brutal death, and then negated once more by twenty liters of diesel or a few gallons of sulfuric acid, then Butler's description of derealization fits perfectly. Here we take it a step further and say that the practice of making posol is an attempt at an (almost) *absolute* derealization beyond the state of deadness, since in the specificity and anonymity of a particular case, the body-object, in the process of its dissolution or liquefaction, is indeed entirely (or almost entirely) exhausted.[47]

CONCLUSION

The brutality that overflows our concept of violence is one that threatens the very humanity of flesh-and-bone persons. When brutality is normalized in the ways described above, the objectification of persons is a natural consequence. In that normalization, persons lose their individuality, their personality, and their claim to humanity—losses that expose their vulnerability and precariousness and leave them open for derealization. In narco-culture, the exposure of vulnerability takes the form of turning participants in the culture into potential threats or enemies to the continual reproduction of the culture's ends. The other becomes the subject of dissolution or, again, derealization, which is a process of dissolving the real, of destroying the other's reality and reducing her to a spectral object—of derealizing her humanity.

The practice of brutalizing a human body until it is liquid—that is, of turning someone into sludge or soup—is not a common practice. However, its actual practice, however infrequent, affirms it as a real possibility in the sphere of human coexistence. That it exists *at all* calls us to respond. This chapter has made the case that so long as our normative notion of personhood is tied, as it is in narco-culture, to economic or utilitarian values, a morally and politically muted objection to their *disposal*, *eradication*, and *dissolution* will always be possible. Narco-culture is ultimately another manifestation of hyperconsumerism run amok, and

47. Again, the parenthetical *almost* and *almost entirely* refer to the body's resiliency—that it is not entirely deteriorated by the posol process, as the case of Santiago Meza López illustrates.

liquefying persons is one more way to streamline a market process or uphold the frantic fetishization of excess that underlies it. Again, this is the consequence of a civilized society, of a social space in which brutality has become ontology, and not one belonging to an irrational, primitive culture of wild beasts or barbarians. It is a perverse rationality, to be sure, but one required for the proper management of a way of life that has instituted itself as culture.

Conclusion(s)

The spectacle of cartel violence shocks and horrifies. Our moral conscience protests but is impotent before the sheer number of dead and missing—a number that rises year by year as we enter the second decade of what the *Wall Street Journal* called a "Crisis of Civilization."[1] By 2018, that number rose to more than 250,000 dead and over 34,000 missing since 2006; midway through 2019, "Mexico set a record for homicides, with 17,608. . . . The country of almost 125 million now has as many as 100 killings a day nationwide."[2] These numbers stupefy and, in so doing, succeed in hiding the real human cost—the concrete dead. That is, obstructed by the tally, there are real flesh-and-bone human beings derealized, de-faced, and dehumanized by the numbers themselves or, better yet, by the *counting*. While the counting of the dead and missing may seem innocent and necessary for the sake of political accountability, it is required by a logic of brutality that demands the normalization of its own rituals and the passivity of its accountants, who look not at the atrocities and the ruin that these numbers represent globally and to the human community but at the *culture* that allows it—at Mexico, at narco-culture.

This book has proposed a philosophical intervention into the culture, its logic, and its rituals. From our reflections, several conclusions can be drawn that seek to make sense of the violence and the brutality of narco-culture.

1. Narco-culture is *culture*, pure and simple. It has an economic substructure (the business of narcotics trafficking) and an ontological base

1. Cordoba and Montes, "'It's a Crisis of Civilization.'"
2. Associated Press, "19 Bodies."

(a form of being—namely, the way of brutality) upon which a form of life is established that produces music, art, literature, religion, and other constructions considered to be real cultural contributions. One may ask, Why is it important to think of narco-culture as culture? The answer has to do with the way we *ought* to attend to it—namely, by seriously considering the various ways in which it produces and reproduces itself in our own time through excessive violence, normalized brutality, and the ritualization of death. Minimizing it as a sub- or fringe culture or, as some have suggested, as a "culture of the disenfranchised" (see chapter 1) minimizes both its contributions to humanity (its music and art, for example) and the atrocities that are carried out in its name or as a consequence of its imperatives. Finally, considering it as culture allows us to see the manner in which individuals are interpellated by its various social sanctions, rules, and demands that, in our effort of making them explicit, will perhaps motivate the appropriate social, political, economic, or even philosophical interventions.

2. Narco-culture is *violent* and also *more than* violent. In chapter 2, we considered violence in its analytic and instrumental definitions as well as the various ways in which the violence of narco-culture meets and exceeds these definitions. We have concluded that the violence of narco-culture is *more than* violence. We base our observations not only on the outward manifestations of a hyperviolence normalized in narco-culture (what we see, read, and hear about) but also on a historical logic internal to Mexico itself. This logic is reflected in a long-standing metanarrative about Mexico—namely, that it is a violent nation made up of violent people. It also talks about the violence of conquest, which is followed by the violence of colonialism and independence, reaching a crescendo with the violence of revolution. In other words, it is a metanarrative that affirms violence and death as written into the fabric of Mexican society, into its cultures and politics. This history of violence suggests a normalization of struggle, suffering, and animosity—a history that motivates the sociologist Claudio Lomnitz to conclude that Mexico "has defined itself as a nation of enemies."[3]

3. Lomnitz, *Mexico and the Idea of Death*, p. 53. What does it mean to say that Mexico is a nation of enemies? And what does this have to do with narco-culture? For one, it means that social and political organization are structured on the basis of enmity

Mexican narco-culture can be thought of as an extreme consequence of a history of enemies dying at each other's hands. The songs and legends of narco-lore attest to an expectation of a violent death at the hands of the enemy. What Lomnitz says about the Mexican "familiarity" with death applies to the narco form of life more than it does to any other culture

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(and related to this, hate, antagonism, rancor, hostility, antipathy, etc.)—that is, on the grounds that the other, my neighbor, represents a possible threat to my own life. This possibility increases when the other has a gun, has a stake in a criminal enterprise, or believes my bare existence poses a threat to his self-interests. These grounds on their own already legitimize narco-violence, both between narcos themselves and cartels and between narco-culture and the state. Because the narco, as necessarily standing *outside* the space of legality, opposes law and order, he is, at least in contemporary times, the *greatest* enemy to community and national life.

Political philosophy has a story to tell about social organization on the basis of animosity. In Carl Schmitt's political thought, for example, the primary political maneuver is to create and define an originary distinction between friend and enemy—one that "denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation" (*Concept of the Political*, p. 26). This is done by the state, which decides who the enemy will be and "decides for itself the friend-enemy distinction" (p. 30). In other words, the state legitimizes itself through the identification of enemies—those that stand against the collective, who threaten it. According to this political stance, then, friends should be protected and are politically valuable; enemies stand outside the space of law and protection and represent those who will be engaged in the death struggles that will define national identity itself.

To say that Mexico is a nation of enemies is to recognize that enemies are constitutive of its historical essence; in other words, that the enemy is not "external" to Mexican history and society but necessarily internal to it (constitutive of its identity) and dependent on it. In Mexican history (and correspondingly, in its politics), the nation creates and re-creates itself in the struggle against internal enemies—that is, those who seek its destruction from within. These enemies can be real or imagined, but they must "exist" in one way or another. The enemy is, in this way, as Giorgio Agamben suggests in a similar context, "something that is included solely through an exclusion" (*Homo Sacer*, p. 11). In narco-culture, participants in narco-violence are both necessary to Mexican identity and rejected by the state apparatus as a threat to the greater good. They are included by being excluded *as enemies*. However, the more necessary the enemy becomes in the definition of identity, the more power is bestowed on the enemy's role in social or cultural contexts. This would explain a phenomenon that Claudio Lomnitz describes in the following way: "Instead of having a towering and universally acclaimed hero, Mexico is haunted by an entire pantheon of caudillos, who often died at each other's hands" (*Mexico and the Idea of Death*, p. 54).

A nation of enemies means that violence is unavoidable and that death at the hands of the other will not provoke surprise. As Schmitt warns, "To the enemy concept belongs the ever-present possibility of combat" and these "receive their real meaning precisely because they [friend, enemy, and combat] refer to the real possibility of physical killing" (*Concept of the Political*, p. 32).

in this geographical space: "The Mexican's flirtation and familiarity with death is also the recognition of an achieved modus vivendi between the descendants of mortal enemies, a tactical and provisional collective reconciliation in the knowledge that no one escapes death."[4] An illustration makes this recognition obvious: when Valentín Elizalde, a murdered narco-corrido singer whose *profession* implies his *willing participation* in narco-culture, sings his hit song "A mis enemigos" (To my enemies) and tells them "You know who you're messing with / Come and try your luck," he is affirming not only that his enemies envy his success but also that he knows that they want him dead.[5] The song itself is both a proclamation that he is not afraid to die and a confession that he is aware that "no one escapes death." When Elizalde was brutally assassinated on November 25, 2006, the assassin confessed that the murder had to do with that specific song, which had offended Elizalde's *enemies*. It is important to note here that Elizalde's death points not only to the "flirtation with death" common to narco-culture but also to the fact that the narco form of life is all encompassing, and thus the decision to participate can be as easy as singing songs about it or even listening to those songs.

3. Narco-culture is *brutal*. A central point of this work is that violence, as a concept, cannot properly capture the reality of those acts that define narco-culture as a social and human threat. We need a new name for the violence, and this name is brutality. Brutality constitutes the ontological foundations (the way of being) of the narco form of life. The *logic* of brutality demands a primary dehumanization, or derealization, of persons, who can then be subject to violence and erasure. This same logic also requires that the realization or dehumanization does not become evident, that it does not become spectacle; brutality recedes into the background as a normalization and does not seek to call attention to itself. This, of course, makes it so that violence and death become everyday affairs, and their normality is ritualized in the practices of the culture. Narco-culture is brutal in this way, and those who exist within its horizon are always already (due to their essential vulnerability) possible victims of its death rituals.

4. Lomnitz, *Mexico and the Idea of Death*, p. 55.
5. Elizalde, "A mis enemigos."

4. Narco-culture is a threat to *personhood* itself. The brutality of narco-culture interrogates our most basic assumptions about violence, its nature, and its limits. It also asks us to consider the nature of personhood itself, to rethink the limits of what we deem permissible in terms of the treatment of others, to think about the harm we are allowed (by culture or society) to inflict on others in order to meet our ends or the demands of our *form of life*; it interrogates us as to the ruin to which the other may be subjected. An excessively violent act—like that of dismembering, decapitating, or liquefying another—makes us question the limits and nature not only of violence but of brutality, which is, as we claim, *more than violence*. The hyperviolent act overly saturates our concepts; it pushes against the boundaries of our moral, epistemological, and political imagination.

A normative conception of personhood, wherein a person's value is measured according to utility or function in the economics of narco-trafficking, has far-reaching consequences. The person's embodiment can be taken for granted for the sake of greater imperatives (of economic or financial projects)—that is, for the sake of an overriding reason, one's essential human vulnerability can be exposed in spectacle. YouTube videos showing executions and decapitations, images of bodies hanging from crowded pedestrian bridges, severed heads left with genitals in their mouths: these are all meant to provoke horror, terror, or as Adriana Cavarero calls it, horrorism. We could call it narco-horrorism, although we do not, since horrorism has a different, voyeuristic logic. Our claim above has been that it is in the logic of brutality that excessive acts of human harm remain hidden behind normalizations and repetitions. This does not mean that brutality always hides behind these, as some acts are meant to be seen. Consider the actions of one of the Tijuana Cartel's most infamous capos, whose brutality bordered on the cinematic:

> The punishment [dismembering people and laying them out for everyone to see] was less about destroying evidence and more about devastating the victim's family psychologically. Ramón [Arellano Félix] was famed for throwing victim's corpses onto a fire, grilling up some steaks over it, and standing around with his goons, enjoying beef, beer, and cocaine.[6]

6. Grillo, *El Narco*, p. 81.

However, neither do acts like these—or the ones previously mentioned—qualify as horrorism, since no one is shocked by the spectacle. Burning, hanging, or decapitating bodies no longer provokes horror or terror; it provokes instead perhaps only powerlessness, disgust, or concern. And there are plenty more examples of this kind of unnecessarily violent excess. Here we think of Ramón Arellano Félix's cruelty and the brutality of the act, of the spectacle that the act tried to project. Most brutal acts deny and refuse the spectacle, however, as is the case with making posol or dumping bodies in anonymous mass graves.

5. Considering that brutality is ontologized in the way described in this book, and considering also that narco-culture is culture in the way described, another philosophically interesting question has to do with human agency: Are people in narco-culture free to do as they please or must they assume the mandates of the narco form of life? Is narco-culture determining in the exercise of choice? Or, if we assume that narco-culture is determining or that brutality is ontological, what happens with human free will?

To say that narco-culture is the social-existential space that we have made it out to be—one where regulae and a self-generating form of life have normalized violence, where brutality hides behind its own dehumanizations—is to suggest that persons are not free. They are not free to choose, free to live as they please, or free in some other meaningful way. Someone could object that individual participants in narco-culture *freely* decide to involve themselves in the illegal economy even with the knowledge that their participation may cost them their lives. Here, our talk turns to human agency as autonomy of choice—they freely choose the "life." We wonder, however, about how free this "choice" actually is when it is a choice between "living like a dog" or "dying like a king." In other words, is the choice to engage in the activities of narco-culture free or is it predetermined by the unavailability of other choices?

Without getting embroiled in the determinism versus free will debates common in philosophy, I posit the following claim: existing conditions of brutality are determining to such an extent that the possibilities of action (before agents existing in the narco-context) will be limited so that agents are, in the end, determined by their circumstances. In other words, individuals are free to the extent that they choose among a limited

set of alternatives, themselves determined by the context in which they find themselves. Manuel Vargas calls the "circumstances that support and enable exercises of agency" the "moral ecology."[7] The moral ecology of narco-culture is one that involves the allure of unimaginable riches, the hope for one's name to be inscribed forever in song (in a narco-corrido), and the seduction of fame or infamy. These ideas float freely in the moral ecology of narco-culture and, together with concrete and immediate conditions of poverty, brutality, economic alienation, and political marginalization, inform imaginations and establish purposes while fueling action. The agent's freedom is thus bound to narco-culture—to its economy, its politics, and the aspirations of its people (among other ties, such as religious, familial, and educational). The state, rather than offering a way out of the bondage, labels those marginalized by these conditions as enemies of the public good and thus as untouchable yet killable, thereby closing off, in advance, any possibility of escape (except by dying, of course). These enemies are, after all, biopolitical bodies that with their labor, their brutality, and their death feed the spectacle that ultimately justifies the limits and function of the state itself. As Vargas tells us, "Societies, states, and cultures all structure our actual capacities,"[8] and in the case of narco-culture, those capacities will be limited to what the state and this particular culture requires for the process of its own justification—namely, the capacity to kill and the capacity to die.

6. In a general sense, our phenomenological intervention reveals that narco-culture is a brutal yet productive and very human culture. Human bodies are inserted into the culture as object-bodies whose only intrinsic value is their ability to contribute to the narco-economy through their labor (as mules, assassins, lookouts, etc.), the sacrifice of their bodies (as soldiers, bodyguards, dead bodies for spectacle), or their silence (as citizens of the culture, keepers of secrets, etc.). In so doing, narco-culture transforms its citizens into a vulnerable class for whom saying no to the call or demands of narco-culture is usually not an option (non-participation, while an option, is usually not a very appealing one). Their vulnerability makes them expendable, disposable, replaceable, and killable.

7. Vargas, *Building Better Beings*, p. 246.
8. Vargas, p. 247.

7. In narco-culture, the dead are usually thought to have been participants in the narco form of life—regardless of whether their participation was voluntary or involuntary. This is a form of objectification, or derealization. Their derealization means that it does not matter whether they chose this way of life. The dead, in dying violent or brutal deaths, are stripped of their concreteness, and their deaths point to a political solution to the "problem" (e.g., a narcotics trafficker, in involving himself in the illicit business, has threatened the public's health, and thus his death at the hands of another is always already justified).[9] Killing the perceived narco, the trafficker, is thus allowed, and his death will contribute to the statistics of the War on Drugs while not causing moral outrage. He is a criminal and, because of his inscription (his inhabiting) in narco-culture, always already judged and banned and thus outside the realm of the properly human. Giorgio Agamben puts it this way:

> The relation of exception is a relation of ban. He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather *abandoned* by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable.[10]

Narco-culture thus represents, under this schema, an outlaw space. Moreover, since it is still within the purview of the state, it is indistinguishably inside and outside. It exists, as Agamben notes, in a "relation of exception" to the state: "We shall give the name *relation of exception* to the extreme form of relation by which something is included solely through its exclusion."[11]

8. Those who participate (in one way or another) in the narco form of life will be interpreted as attaining the status of exemptions to any sort of civil protection. They may kill each other at will; they are those who *must* die for the sake of the culture. After all, as I have often heard in

9. The trafficking of illegal drugs in Mexico falls under laws that protect public health. Speaking of these early laws, J. C. Puyana et al. write, "The key reasoning for outlawing the commerce of [illicit] substances was that they were deemed 'noxious to health.'" See Puyana et al., "Drug Violence and Trauma," pp. 309–17.
10. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 28.
11. Agamben, p. 18.

the context of any violent death, *they knew what they were getting themselves into*. Moreover, because they *must* die, they are also killable. The necropolitical commitments assumed by narco-culture are made explicit in the more than *two hundred thousand deaths* since the War on Drugs began in 2006. The dead "deserved" their deaths only because their deaths were already allowed in advance by their involvement in narco-culture and by a decision (made perhaps implicitly and institutionalized through myth and cultural repetitions) that they *must die*.

9. Of course, because the nation-state requires its internal enemies, narco-culture arrives at the self-awareness that *it is outside* the space of law. As Maihold and Maihold write, narco-culture broadcasts this self-consciousness and says that "its message is impunity [and finds] itself hovering over law and its capacity to impose its own order and its own justice."[12] As narco-culture becomes more aware of its own power and thus more aware of its own independence from accepted culture, it achieves a state of *being a state*. Consequently, narco-culture, in its self-conception as a political entity, constructs itself as the exception to the exception and thus perpetually affirms its *identity* through violence and death.

10. Finally, a premise of this book has been that Mexican narco-culture is a manifestation of advanced modern culture—it operates under liberal economic principles, exalts competition and profit, and takes full advantage of free markets and the laws that scaffold these (even if its principal economy is, ironically, *illegal*). Nevertheless, there *does exist* a relation with violence and death that might seem prima facie barbaric and primitive, which might seem prima facie irrational and natural. I insist, however, that the cultural relationship between death and the allowances of brutality is not a symptom of cultural backwardness but rather a symptom of advanced modern consumer cultures themselves. In this and other senses discussed in this book, Mexican narco-culture and the brutality that underlies it put us all firmly into question.

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